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# **Ecopoetry and the Imaginative Impulse**

A critical and creative thesis presented for  
paper 139.861 to fulfill the requirements  
of the Master of Creative Writing

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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses two methods of investigation – a critical essay on the poetry of Dinah Hawken and a collection of poetry – to explore the relationship between contemporary poetry and the natural world.

The critical essay examines Hawken's nature poetry published in eight collections in New Zealand between 1987 and 2015. In order to better understand her intentions and techniques, it explores her work alongside an investigation of ecopoetry, a genre that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century. It begins with a brief summary of the rise and various definitions of ecopoetry, and explains how Hawken's work aligns with the genre's basic terms of reference. However, it sets Hawken apart from much ecopoetry, arguing that though at times her work explicitly references human environmental degradation, it more often portrays nature as resilient, not vulnerable as nature is typically depicted in ecopoetry.

Specifically, this thesis argues that Hawken's nature frequently models ways for people to better cope in a technological age. Many of her poems draw a link between inner and outer worlds, that is, between nature and consciousness. In these ways, her work is distinct from much ecopoetry which is polemic. Polemic ecopoetry tends to rely on literal descriptions and rhetorical assertion because its primary aim is to raise awareness of environmental concerns. Instead, Hawken's work often aligns with a critical school of thought that suggests there is a larger catchment of ecopoetry that includes those poems more akin to a Romantic engagement with nature, specifically the notion that nature has a positive effect on consciousness. Such poetry uses the language of figure and imagination. The essay explores the ways in which Hawken has negotiated the tension between the polemic most often associated with ecopoetry and a poetry of perception that is more Romantic in its aesthetics, during

the thirty-five years she has been writing about relationships between people and the natural world.

The creative component of the thesis is a collection of my poetry that has been shaped and informed by the investigation of the critical essay. My poetry, too, struggles with the tension between poetry of polemic and of perception as it explores relationships between people and nature with an awareness of environmental concerns. In some cases, it adapts strategies and techniques observed in Hawken's work. For example, some of the poems project nature as modeling composure and resilience. By suggesting that nature is important to us, these poems are implicitly ecopoetic. Other poems are more in line with mainstream ecopoetry. For example, some draw explicit attention to environmental degradation, particularly settler deforestation for farming in New Zealand resulting in the loss of indigenous trees and birds and their replacement by destructive exotics. Other poems contemplate the constructedness of landscapes so familiar they seem natural. Throughout the writing of these poems, I have become aware of the need to temper polemic and to aim for perception in order to gain the emotional resonance important in lyric poetry.

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I would like to acknowledge New Zealand Poetry Society for providing me with crucial encouragement over the past eight years and membership of a vibrant poetry community. My poem “Biking to the Manawatu River” – included in this thesis – is the winner of the society’s 2015 International Poetry Competition and will be published in the society’s anthology *scattered feathers*. A version of my poem “Bumblebees” from this thesis will also be published in the anthology.

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## Introduction

The critical component of this thesis explores Dinah Hawken's nature poetry to find out how her poems respond to nature – the way we affect it and the ways it affects our lives. It examines her explicit attention to environmental concerns in some poems alongside other, more meditative poems connecting nature and human consciousness. I am interested in how Hawken negotiates the tension between these. That is, I am interested in the tensions between poems that draw explicit attention to environmental degradation and sometimes become polemic<sup>1</sup> in their criticism of it, and those poems that focus on the way nature affects our state of mind and appeal at the level of perception and imagination. The essay asks how Hawken deals with both impulses in ways that are sometimes more successful than others – the former offering a model for my own work.

To find answers to these questions, I examine Hawken's work through the lens of ecopoetry, a genre that was named in the mid-twentieth-century and has become established in recent times. I explore the various definitions of the term ecopoetry and the ways in which Hawken's work aligns with the genre, and how it is distinct.

In the essay, I investigate a selection of nature poems from Hawken's eight collections of poetry published in New Zealand between 1987 and 2015.

Thematically, these collections traverse personal responsibility, social justice and personal grief, but overwhelmingly they are about living in and with the natural world. The titles, in chronological order, are: *It Has No Sound and is Blue (poems)* (1987), *Small Stories of Devotion* (1991), *Water, Leaves, Stones* (1995), *Oh There*

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<sup>1</sup> Such polemic ecopoetry is described as containing “straightforwardly prescriptive statements” (Charles I. Armstrong in “Ecopoetry’s Quandary, 242) and as poetry that begins with “a set of

*You Are Tui!* (2001), *Garden Poems* (2004), *One Shapely Thing* (2006), *The Leaf Ride* (2011), *Ocean and Stone* (2015).

My investigation into the themes and poetics of Hawken's nature poems finds that they are distinct from nature poems that admire, describe or suggest awe of nature. Rather, they interrogate the natural world with an awareness of environmental degradation and an interest in nature's effect on human consciousness. That is, the way the external natural world influences, affects or changes a person's sense of self or identity, or response to their surroundings, or perception of their lives.

I argue that Hawken's work may be defined as ecopoetic within the recently established genre of ecopoetry. At times her poems explicitly draw attention to environmental concerns, as ecopoetry typically does. But human impact on the natural world, which is the focus of much ecopoetry, is more often a backdrop to contemplation of a connection between nature and human consciousness. In this regard, Hawken's poetry aligns with the definition of ecopoetry proposed by a minority school of critical thought that contends ecopoetry need not necessarily focus explicitly on environmental issues. These critics, notably Jonathan Bate, broaden the definition of ecopoetry by arguing that it continues in the tradition of Romanticism, particularly the Romantic notion that nature is beneficial to human consciousness. Specifically, while acknowledging human degradation of nature, Hawken's nature is more often resilient, rather than vulnerable as ecopoetry often depicts it. It models examples of ways for people to cope in a technological age, suggesting people are victims of technology, just as nature is. Rather than addressing concerns about human impact on nature with explicit polemic – although sometimes Hawken does this – her poems more often raise a connection between nature and people where nature is necessary to emotional wellbeing. My essay considers the ways Hawken's poetry



shifts between the polemic typical of much ecopoetry, which is marked by literal description and assertion, and the poetry of perception associated with Romanticism, which is marked by figurative language and perception.

The creative component of the thesis is a collection of my own poems, which are connected to the critical essay by their struggle with the tension between polemical ecopoetry (that is, poetry with a point to make about environmental degradation) and a nature poetry of perception (poems interested in the ways our states of mind are influenced by the presence or absence of nature). My poems are framed within an awareness of environmental concerns but strive to draw attention to a perceptual connection between people and nature. My ongoing struggle is to develop my sense of nature and response to it through interpretative description, images and metaphor that take the work beyond the merely observational on the one hand and rhetorical on the other.

For this collection, issues of displacement and connection to place interest me in their link to the environment. Some poems consider how connection to place, through memory, experience and physical location, are important lifetime markers. They consider this through the lens of Pakeha connection to settled land, describing land as a site of belonging. They raise concern about colonial damage to the land's natural state, and contemplate how familiar landscapes, such as a beach and a river, are less natural than we suppose – in fact bear the scars of human impact although their surroundings are so familiar we may consider them to have always been this way. The collection strives to use language of imagination and figure, rather than rhetoric, to describe the ways in which contemporary entanglement between people and nature gives rise to both anxiety and consolation.

**The Ecopoetry of**

**Dinah Hawken**

## Ecopoetry – its rise and definitions

“[a]ll ecocritics concur that science-based knowledge of looming ecological disaster is not enough, because knowledge can lead to effective political and social action only when informed and impelled, as it is in literature, by imagination and feeling.” (Abrams 75)

Nature writing is “as old as recorded literature” (Abrams 71) and has differing purposes. In order to investigate Hawken’s methods and intentions I have examined her nature poems through the lens of ecopoetry. This genre developed in the twentieth-century alongside ecocriticism, a word coined by William Rueckert to describe “critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities” (Abrams 71). I will begin with a brief history of the rise and definition of ecopoetry. Then I will examine the particulars of Hawken’s work to suggest how it aligns with the various definitions of the genre and to suggest how it is distinct.

Ecocriticism originated in the late 1970s and became established by the 1990s. In an anthology of essays, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), editor Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). M.H. Abrams’ *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2005) explains that “combining ‘criticism’ and a shortened form of ‘ecology’” (71) formed the word. Awareness of human damage to the environment beginning in the 1960s and leading to the widely accepted possibility of a global environmental crisis, plus the idea that literature might be a catalyst towards social and political action to reduce

environmental harm, underpin the genesis of ecocriticism and its subset, ecopoetry.

Abrams explains:

By the latter part of the twentieth century there was a widespread realization that the earth was in an environmental crisis ... [due to] industrial and chemical pollution of the 'biosphere' ... the depletion of forests and of natural resources, the relentless extinction of plant and animal species, and the explosion of the human population beyond the capacity of the earth to sustain it. It was in this climate of crisis, or even imminent catastrophe, that ecocriticism was inaugurated. (72)

According to Glotfelty, the term ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology. An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978) (xx). The essay presents a polemical case for combining knowledge of human environmental damage with literary work in order to facilitate social and political action. It advances the notion of applying "ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (107) in order to exploit "the power of the word" at a time when "real power" is "political, economic, and technological" and "real knowledge is increasingly scientific" (115). Rueckert's case for environmental action through literary study and writing is based on the study of poetry. He declares, "We must formulate an ecological poetics" (114) and transfers to poetry the language of ecology by metaphorically describing an energy cycle emanating from poetry in the manner of ecological energy transfer systems: "if poets are suns, then poems are green plants among us for they clearly arrest energy on its path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matter from lower to higher order, but help to create a self-perpetuating and evolving system" (111). To better understand his vision of this poetry/nature connection it is worth quoting the following extract in full:

To charge the classroom with ecological purpose one has to begin to think of it in symbiotic terms as a cooperative arrangement which makes it possible to release the stream of energy which flows out of the poet and into the poem, out of the poem and into the readers, out of the readers and into the classroom, and then back into the readers and out of the classroom with them, and finally back into the larger community in a never ending circuit of life. (121)

Though Rueckert didn't use the term "ecopoetry," his reference to the importance of the poems themselves – not just the criticism – implies such a genre. It has since been defined in works of critical literature and in anthologies since the late 1990s. Such definitions are tentative. For example, in *Ecopoetry. A Critical Introduction* (2002), J. Scott Bryson is careful to note that "(a)ny definition of the term *ecopoetry* should probably remain fluid at this point because scholars are only beginning to offer a thorough examination of the field" (5). Charles I. Armstrong, in his essay "Ecopoetry's Quandary" (2010), says "ecopoetry is both in the genesis of being defined and of defining older genres" and is "arguably more the name of a problem, or ongoing discussion, than an established phenomenon" (242). Nevertheless, a predominant view of ecopoetry exists, as do some fundamental defining terms of reference.

Critics tend to agree that ecopoetry is not the same as traditional nature poetry or pastoral poetry or contemporary poetry that describes the natural landscape, although sometimes it overlaps with these. It is distinct in acknowledging dysfunction between human habitation and the health of the natural world, and in recognising that the wellbeing of people and nature are inextricably linked. Bryson says ecopoetry has three characteristics that distinguish it from past nature writing. These are "an

emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world,” “humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature” and “an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality ... that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe” (5-6). He describes ecopoetry as a subset of nature poetry that “takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues” (5). In sum, while not everyone agrees precisely with Bryson’s paradigm, the prevailing contention is that ecopoetry is distinct from traditional nature poetry on the basis of the contemporaneity and global view of its subject matter, and because it foregrounds the possibility of human-caused environmental disaster.

Terry Gifford, in *Green Voices. Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (1995), asserts that ecopoetry arose in the late twentieth-century along with increasing global concern for the environment. He says nature poetry became both absent from British poetry and “a pejorative term” until the end of the 1980s when “quite quickly everything ... turned green” (2). He quotes Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, a reviewer of the 1990 “Special Green Issue” of *Poetry Wales*.

Poets need no longer apologise for writing about Nature. The new Nature poetry is more than merely descriptive: it deals with the tensions between us and the environment, our intense and often destructive relationship with it, our struggle to come to terms with the fact that we’re a part of the world out there and not simply observers and manipulators. (3)

Gifford says the “sense of a ‘new Nature poetry’ is, of course, part of a wider social concern with the future of our planetary environment that has demanded a reexamination of our relationship with the natural world” (6). Leonard M. Scigaj, in *Four American Ecopoets* (1999) defines ecopoetry as “poetry that persistently stresses

human cooperation with nature conceived as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems” (37), work in which “contemporary ecopoets see humans and nature as equal and necessarily interdependent partners in the maintenance of ecological health” (43). In his introduction to the British anthology *Earth Shattering Ecopoems* (2007), Neil Astley contends

Ecopoetry goes beyond traditional nature poetry to take on distinctly contemporary issues, recognising the interdependence of all life on earth, the wildness and otherness of nature, and the irresponsibility of our attempts to tame and plunder nature. Ecopoems dramatise the dangers and poverty of a modern world perilously cut off from nature and ruled by technology, self-interest and economic power. (15)

These definitions represent the predominant view that ecopoetry is a new genre that has grown, as has ecocriticism, from twentieth-century environmental concerns. The defining aspects of this new genre are acknowledged awareness of human damage to the environment, an attitude of sympathy or empathy with nature, and an ecocentric perspective – that is, foregrounding the natural world and depicting it as equal in importance to the human world.

Following Rueckert’s call for poetry that exploits “the power of the word” (115) in order to raise political or social consciousness about environmental issues, much ecopoetry (including poetry retrospectively described as ecopoetic), argues that in order to preserve the health of people we must first preserve the health of the earth. Nature, therefore, tends to be depicted as fragile and vulnerable to human impact. The prevailing theme is that changes in human perception or behaviour are necessary to mitigate environmental damage.

Rueckert invokes Gary Snyder's collection *Turtle Island* (1969), which he says "enacts a whole program of ecological action" (116). Snyder is now recognised retrospectively as a leading American ecopoet. His poems combine ecological alertness with Buddhist philosophies, often criticizing consumer culture and political power structures. Here is an extract from "The Call of the Wild" from *Turtle Island*:

All these Americans up in special cities in the sky  
Dumping poisons and explosives  
Across Asia first,  
And next North America,

A war against earth.  
When it's done there'll be  
no place

A Coyote could hide. (59-66)

Like much of Snyder's early work, this poem is a polemic against perceived misuse of political power and resultant human spoliation of nature.

Rueckert also invokes *The Lice* (1967) by W.S. Merwin – another leading American ecopoet – describing the collection as "about the deep inner changes which must occur if we are able to keep from destroying the world and survive as human beings" (117). Here is an extract from "For A Coming Extinction" from this collection:

Gray whale  
Now that we are sending you to The End  
That great god  
Tell him  
That we who follow you invented forgiveness  
And forgive nothing (1-6)

The poem – an elegy for extinct species – criticizes the power of humans over the nonhuman world. Its command to the whale, when extinct and in heaven with other



extinct and endangered species, to speak to god on behalf of humanity, mocks the anthropocene – this time when human activity is seen to be the dominant ecological influence:

The irreplaceable hosts ranged countless  
And foreordaining as stars  
Our sacrifices

Join your word to theirs  
Tell him  
That it is we who are important (27-32)

Rueckert says of *The Lice*, “I know of no other book of poems so aware of the biosphere and what humans have done to destroy it as this one” (117). He asserts, “What these poems affirm over and over is that if a new ecological vision is to emerge, the old destructive western one must be deconstructed and abandoned” (118). In these ways, Rueckert argues that poetry belonging to the genre we now know as ecopoetry is a catalyst for social, political and philosophical change.

Wendell Berry, another American ecopoet, criticizes western technology and politics, promoting a need for sustainable methods of agriculture and spiritual awareness based on Christian values. In his essay collection *Standing by Words* (1983), Berry defines ecopoetics as “a response to the world and a respecting of the earth ... a planet that is fragile, a planet of which we are a part but which we do not possess” (282). His poetry often depicts a natural world decimated by human activity. For example, “Dark with Power” in *Openings* (1965) describes land ruined by human exploitation:

Dark with power, we remain  
the invaders of our land, leaving  
deserts where forests were,  
scars where there were hills.

On the mountains, on the rivers,  
on the cities, on the farlands  
we lay weighted hands, our breath  
potent with the death of all things. (1-8)

The phrase “our breath / potent with the death of all things” paints humanity as the enemy of nature and cause of its destruction. This extract is representative of Berry’s ongoing polemic – found in the work of many eco-poets – that destruction of nature is the product of capitalist, consumer society, and that nature is vulnerable to human impact.

New Zealand poets have yet to be critically classified as eco-poets, possibly because such distinctions have not been made within the larger genre of New Zealand nature poetry. Still, eco-poetic sympathies are evident. Ian Wedde’s poem, “Pathway to the Sea” from *Castaly* (1980), dedicated to A.R. Ammons and inspired by Ammons’ long poem “Garbage,” fits the prevalent definition of an eco-poem. In a long, winding narrative it marries a description of redigging a line for a domestic sewer pipe with a protest against the proposed building of an aluminium smelter at Aramoana on the east coast of New Zealand’s South Island.

ALUMINIUM  
SMELTER  
at  
Aramoana, the sea-gate, & someone’s bound to direct  
more effort that  
way soon: listen there’s  
birds out there (40. 1-7)

The poem maligns corporate power and bureaucracy, instead promoting personal responsibility to protect a natural world that is vulnerable to the human one:

... but then we know, don’t we,  
citizen, that there’s nowhere  
to defect to, & that  
living in the

universe doesn't  
leave you  
any place to chuck  
stuff off  
of. (46. 1-9)

In this final stanza, the poem moves beyond local subject matter to a case for global responsibility (with its reference to the universe) and communal accountability (“citizen”) outside of existing political power structures.

New Zealand poet Brian Turner’s “Panoply” from *Taking Off* (2001) might also be described as ecopoetic in its depiction of nature as a casualty of human violation:

take the buffalo herds  
long gone from the prairies  
and the prairie grasses  
that whispered in the winds  
long gone

take the eagles soaring  
over the uplands  
and the arid and dusty valleys  
where streams once burbled  
and rivers frolicked and ran

.....

take the moa and the huia  
extinguished by a taste for meat  
and a love of ceremonial cloaks (13-22, 36-39)

Another New Zealand collection, Leicester Kyle’s posthumously published *The Millerton Sequences* (2014), includes the ten-poem sequence “Death of a Landscape,” which protests against a proposal to strip-mine the Millerton plateau on the west coast of the South Island.

*‘the outcome for the area’* is –

it being replaced;  
*'managing landscape effects'* is –  
concealing the loss;  
*'the final landscape form'* is –  
desolation. (p.91)

This poem contains found language (in italics) taken from the coal mining company's proposal for managing environmental impact, recontextualising it as environmental destruction. Kyle destabilizes the company message for environmental protection.

These examples represent the kind of poetry Rueckert proposed in 1978 when he claimed the role of ecopoetry was to raise consciousness towards social or political action that might change the relationship between people and nature in order to prevent further human-caused environmental degradation. Roger Thompson supports this definition of ecopoetry in his essay "Emerson, Divinity, and Rhetoric in Transcendentalist Nature Writing and Twentieth-Century Ecopoetry." He describes the ecopoet as a "messenger of civic virtue" and ecopoetry as "less about specialized, priestly incantations and more about accessibility to people whom the poet hopes to call to action, not simply contemplation" (37). Bryson, as mentioned earlier, asserts components of ecopoetry are "an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe" (6) as well as the proviso that it "takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues" (5). These views endorse and promote the polemic tone that is prevalent in the genre.

Still, these definitions of ecopoetry, though dominant in America, are not the only ones. There exists a strain of critical resistance to them. Charles I. Armstrong, from the University of Agder in Norway, for example, in his essay "Ecopoetry's Quandary" says the concept of ecopoetry "involves contemporary poetry in rather conflictual relations to practical exigencies, the heritage of Romanticism, and the use of science" (233). He argues that scientific knowledge about environmental issues is

not necessarily a good starting point for poetry, and that poetry is not, in fact, a suitable vehicle for environmental polemic. He uses the example of “Wild Reckoning” (2004), a transatlantic collection of poems addressing the environmental issue, in which seventeen poems were specially commissioned based on the premise that each poet would write a poem out of a cooperative project with a scientist. “The editors had planned a series of dialogues between poets and scientists, but the idea was shelved,” (237) he says, because the poets chose to write instead about aspects of the environment tangential to their liaison with the scientist and the research in hand. He contends that while scientific knowledge may inform environmentally aware poetry, “a precise or insightful understanding of scientific research is far from being a guarantee for imaginative power” (239). He says

Poets can share something of the imaginative liberty underlying much scientific endeavour, and they can also be inspired by the ecological insights provided by modern science. This does not mean, however, that poetry is easily converted into a vehicle for discursive truths about man’s troubled dealings with nature – however laudable and urgent such truths may be. (242)

However, Armstrong argues that ecopoetry can “combine excellent poetical craftsmanship with an attentive curiosity about the natural world” (242) if the polemical attitude is abandoned. He cites British poet Alice Oswald’s collection “Dart” – a long poem in the voices of human and non-human characters that use the Dart River. He says it brings current ecological thought into line with eighteenth-century Romantic nature writing because it “avoids being overtly prescriptive in the way favoured in American conceptions of ecocriticism ... [and] no straightforwardly prescriptive statements where form is bruised to pleasure sense, are included” (241-2). Instead, “(b)y integrating the human subjects into the ecosystem of the river, Oswald

... effectively negotiates with the legacy of Romantic subjectivity” (241). For an alternative position on the definition and purpose of ecopoetry, Armstrong cites British academic and essayist Jonathan Bate whose “understanding of ecopoetry ... has had considerable influence in Britain ... [and] (u)nlike American theorists such as Bryson and Thompson ... has always stressed the continuity between contemporary ecopoetry and Romanticism” (236).

Like Armstrong, Bate, in *The Song of the Earth*, 2000, questions the suitability of poetry as a vehicle for environmental polemic and the notion that the purpose of ecopoetry is to effect social change. He contends the “cause of ecology may not necessarily be best served by poets taking the high moral ground and speaking from the point of view of ecological correctness.” (199). Instead, Bate says:

ecopoetics should begin not as a set of assumptions or proposals about particular environmental issues, but as a way of reflecting upon what it might mean to dwell with the earth. Ecopoetics must concern itself with consciousness. When it comes to practice, we have to speak in other discourses. (266)

To illustrate the difference between poetry of political persuasion and poetry of imagination, Bate compares “The Moose” by Elizabeth Bishop with Gary Snyder’s “Mother Earth: Her Whales.” He argues Bishop’s poem “engage(s) *imaginatively* with the non-human” (199) through the use of language, while Snyder’s poem is merely “an expression of a set of opinions” (199). “The Moose” describes an encounter between passengers on a nighttime bus ride from Nova Scotia to Boston, and a moose which crosses the road, forcing the bus to stop.

Towering, antlerless,  
high as a church,  
homely as a house  
(or safe as houses).

A man's voice assures us  
'Perfectly harmless ...' (139-44)

Bate says the poem recognises “we only know nature by way of culture” and “we reach for similes out of culture – the church, the house – but somehow they are inadequate” (202). The description of the moose “reveals that our dwelling-place is the earth which we share, not the house which we own” (202). The poem describes how the bus passengers react to the presence of the moose:

Taking her time,  
she looks the bus over,  
grand, otherworldly.  
Why, why do we feel  
(we all feel) this sweet  
sensation of joy? (151-6)

Of this extract, Bate says, “Though awe-inspiringly ‘Grand, otherworldly’, the she-moose elicits not fear but ‘joy’, a joy that in connecting us to nature connects us to each other: ‘we feel / (we all feel)’ the same sensation” (202). He contrasts Bishop’s language with Snyder’s in “Mother Earth: Her Whales” which he says contains “no relationship between vehicle and tenor; the medium for the message could as well have been a television panel discussion or a piece of journalistic prose” (202). Here is an extract from Snyder’s poem:

The whales turn and glisten, plunge  
and sound and rise again,  
Hanging over subtly darkening deeps  
Flowing like breathing planets  
in the sparkling whorls of  
living light –

And Japan quibbles for words on  
what kinds of whales they can kill?  
A once-great Buddhist nation  
dribbles methyl mercury  
like gonorrhoea

in the sea. (14-25)

Bate contends the poem does not “attempt to transform into language an experience of dwelling on the earth” and therefore “is not what I call an ‘ecopoem’” (200).

He asserts:

The “weakness of Snyder’s ‘Mother Earth: Her Whales’ is its didacticism about the rights of whales and of the species and native inhabitants of the rainforest; the strength of Bishop’s ‘The Moose’ is that it is a poem which *knows* why we need wild animals. (201)

Bate’s interpretation proposes that Bishop’s poem suggests a visceral sense of connection between the speaker (and by extension others on the bus) and the moose. He says that Bishop’s similes – the church, the house – show “the ineffability of large mammals” and the “insufficiency” of our cultural terms of reference, revealing that “our dwelling place is the earth which we share, not the house which we own” (202). (In contrast, the similes employed by Snyder – breathing planets, gonorrhoea – although not further interrogated by Bate, are to my mind, not as successful because each makes a didactic rather than a perceptive comparison and fails to connect the speaker to the whales, or the country.) Bate argues the purpose of ecopoetry, then, is not to *raise* consciousness towards political or social action that might improve the ecological outlook of the planet, such as Rueckert, Bryson and Thompson propose, but rather to “concern itself with consciousness” (266). He suggests a reformulation of the definition of ecopoetry to demarcate meditative, non-polemical poems that focus on the relationship between nature and consciousness – that is, a lyric subjectivity that suggests the way we view the world through perception, rather than an exposition about the world.



Accordingly, Bate defines ecopoetry as a continuation – an “afterlife” (252) – of Romantic poetry, proposing that the definition of ecopoetry should not be limited to twentieth-century poetry but should be expanded to encompass some poems from the Romantic era, which began in the eighteenth century. He assigns the term ecopoetry, for instance, to readings of William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, John Keats and John Clare: “writers in the Romantic tradition which begins in the late eighteenth century have been especially concerned with ... a progressive severance of human kind from nature that has licensed, or at least neglected, technology’s ravaging of the earth’s finite resources” (245). He recalls Wordsworth’s description in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* of “the beautiful and permanent forms of nature,” claiming Romanticism declares allegiance to this notion by proposing that when we commune with nature “we live with a peculiar intensity, and conversely that our lives are diminished when technology and industrialization alienate us” (245) from it. Furthermore, he says the Romantics saw poetic language as “a special kind of expression which may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature” (245). He says, “Romanticism and its afterlife may be thought of as the exploration of the relationship between external environment and ecology of mind” (252).

Bate’s term “ecology of mind” describes the way human consciousness benefits from connection with nature. Poets, he says, “are often exceptionally lucid or provocative in their articulation of the relationship between internal and external worlds, between being and dwelling” (252). “Being and dwelling” is Bate’s idea that attachment to place and natural landmarks through physical presence and memory establishes a sense of belonging and an understanding of nature as a necessary component of human wellbeing. This leads to a valuing of nature and a desire to defend it from harm. But this notion of protection follows interconnection between

human consciousness and the natural world, rather than from scientific knowledge or political persuasion.

In support of his claim that Romantic poetry may be defined as ecopoetic – “of reflecting upon what it might mean to dwell with the earth” – Bate describes the poetry of John Clare as “the record of (Clare’s) search for a home in the world” (153). He argues that Clare’s detailed descriptions of aspects of nature, such as birds nests and wild places, which are sometimes written from the point of view of the inanimate world, demonstrate that nature’s details matter in securing Clare’s sense of self-identity. In “The Mores,” Clare describes the effects of the 1809 Enclosure Act on the flora and fauna of his village of Helpstone, and on his own state of mind:

Moors, loosing from the sight, far, smooth, and blea,  
Where swopt the plover in its pleasure free  
Are vanished now with commons wild and gay  
As poet’s visions of life’s early day. (37-40)

Bate reads this poem as imagining “enclosure as an impediment to dwelling in the world ... The birds are presented as victims ... every bit as much as the poor” (164). He argues that “our identities are constituted by a combination of environment and memory” (173) and Clare’s poems about places as landmarks show that “without trees and hedges to orient himself, Clare has no inner map” (172). Bate says, “what the life and work of John Clare can show us is that even in terms of pragmatic self-interest it is to our benefit to care for nature’s rights – our inner ecology cannot be sustained without the health of ecosystems” (174).

Bate defines the word ‘ecopoetic’ as “a *poiesis* (Greek ‘making’) of the *oikos* (Greek ‘home’ or ‘dwelling-place’)” (245) in support his contention that the purpose of ecopoetry is not political persuasion, but rather contemplation of the relationship between interior and exterior worlds. In sum, he argues that rather than being limited to twenty and twenty-first century polemical environmental poetry, the term

ecopoetry deserves a wider definition. He views it as a continuation of Romanticism, encompassing selected Romantic poetry from the nineteenth century to contemporary poems that continue the Romantic tradition, linking nature and consciousness within the context of an awareness of environmental concerns.

### **Ecopoetry's broader terms of reference**

Returning now to Hawken's work, I will discuss how it fits the broader terms of reference of the genre of ecopoetry. That is, it aligns with Bryson and Thompson's definition of ecopoetry as being aware of environmental issues from the twenty and twenty-first centuries, acknowledging the prospect of global catastrophe, being ecocentric – that is, acknowledging the natural world as equal in importance to the human world – and being mindful of the interdependence of humankind and nature. Then I will explain how Hawken's work is distinct from much polemical ecopoetry and how these distinctions gesture towards Bate's alternate definition of ecopoetry as a contemplative form continuing the tradition of Romanticism.

“Palais des Nations: the memorial” in *The Leaf Ride* (2011) reflects on the precarious state of the planet while Hawken's speaker observes the landscape surrounding the bronze statue called “Family” in the park of the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. The poem explicitly acknowledges contemporary environmental degradation from human impact and the potential for global crisis, two aspects of mainstream ecopoetry:

Suddenly, our awkward stagger  
towards the idea of united nations  
became again what it is—part  
of the chance to survive  
on this damaged, spherical planet. (26-30)

Another poem in the collection, “Peace on Earth” also explicitly references twentieth and twenty-first century environmental degradation. It states, “The rain is acid. / The stream is heavy with metals. / There is no well” (5, 1-3). Similarly, “Where We Say We Are” in *Oh THERE You Are TUI! New and Selected Poems* (2001) draws explicit attention to pollution and critiques governments for failing in their various agreements to make protecting the environment a priority:

Elsewhere, sewage and heavy metals are billowing out into  
the gulf, and the bay and the channel, and the lagoon. Let’s hear it  
for multilateral negotiation, the Convention on Ocean Dumping,  
the Law of the Sea. Let’s hear the ocean pounding into the  
caverns at Punakaiki. Let’s call each other by our first names:  
drift-net, ozone-hole, oil-slick, DDT. (p.109)

The six-line poem “Seduction” from *Water, Leaves, Stones* (1995) confronts another potential environmental danger – the issue of nuclear arms – and raises the possibility of global catastrophe:

The proliferation of nuclear weapons  
runs along the line and slips off the tongue.

Before we know it uranium and plutonium  
are in the room and everybody wants them.

Listen. They’re rich, smooth and powerful.  
They’re heavenly bodies. They’re Greek gods.

The poem, here in full, suggests that the names we give such elements disguise their potential for destruction, clothing them instead in the seductive qualities of their namesakes, creating mental images of powerful, sensual gods rather than weapons of mass destruction. It explicitly raises the issue of the threat of nuclear disaster.

Another way in which Hawken’s work aligns with mainstream ecopoetry is by demonstrating an ecocentric perspective. Ecocentrism is “the view that all living things and their earthly environment, no less than the human species, possess importance, value and even moral and political rights” (Abrams 73). It is the opposite

of ‘anthropocentrism,’ which is “oriented to the interests of human beings, who are viewed as opposed to and superior to nature, and free to exploit natural resources and animal species for their own purposes” (Abrams 72). Hawken articulated her ecocentric view of nature at the 2014 “Working with Nature” conference held at Massey University in Palmerston North:

I have been writing poetry for 35 years and my relationship with the natural world has always been central to it ... I have come to recognize how much more dependent, and interdependent, I am, on and with, the world around me ... At the same time I have come to recognize how soundly I have been conditioned to think of myself, and other humans beings, as separate. And often superior. We are, in fact, in the strange position of being inextricably entangled with the non-human world (think of how we are all breathing it in now, every few seconds) and yet we are able to stand back from it too and experience ourselves as separate.

(speech notes, 1)

Hence Hawken’s nature poems often foreground the natural world and describe it as equal in importance to humanity. For example, in “Epilogue: The Harbour Poems” from *Small Stories of Devotion* (1991), Hawken describes nature as autonomous, that is, existing for itself, not as a resource or scenery for human appreciation:

Imagine behind these lines dozens and dozens  
of tiny seed-heads whispering. They are a field  
of mauve flowers. What they say is inexplicable  
to us because they speak another language, not this one  
written from left to right across them, made up of  
distinct and very subtle, ready-to-burgeon sounds. (13-18)

“What they say is inexplicable to us” implies that there is a limit to our understanding of nature, and that poetry (“these lines”) is unable to explicate its meaning. The extract suggests nature is a part of the world to be accepted, without being fully known, or interrogated in order that we may use it for our own purposes. According to reviewer Michael Hulse, Hawken “releases the world into motion, into autonomous

existence; she frees it of the stasis of human cognition” by speaking “of a natural world the real life of which is independent of human encoding” (133-4). Here, Hawken’s ecocentrism suggests that the non-human world possesses importance and value not only equal to, but also apart from, the human world.

In Hawken’s work, interdependence between people and nature is sometimes framed, as in much ecopoetry, as nature depending on us for survival in a world increasingly overtaken by human expansion. For example “Talking to a Tree Fern” from *It Has No Sound and is Blue* (1987) depicts the native tree fern as fearful of human attack:

I hear the chainsaw preening itself  
and sense the spikes stiffening on your trunks. (27-8)

The poem also portrays the tree fern as bereft of its natural habitat:

Once I saw you at a Marist Centre  
stiff and brittle like an empty erection,  
no fronds, no flow. (29-31)

This extract suggests that once taken from its natural habitat into the human world, the tree fern loses its vigour – “like an empty erection” suggests infertility, “no fronds, no flow” suggests stagnation. These descriptions of the negative effects of human impact on the natural world indicate another aspect of Hawken’s work that is in keeping with mainstream ecopoetry.

### **Hawken’s nature models composure and resilience**

Still, contrary to polemic ecopoetry in which nature is often depicted as vulnerable to human impact, Hawken’s work more often portrays nature as resilient and composed. And if ecopoetry often describes a frail nature that will benefit from a more empathetic approach from people, Hawken’s poetry often suggests instead that people

will benefit from a clearer understanding of nature's resilience. Rather than being founded on an argument for ecological interdependence, predicated on the notion that nature's wellbeing depends on our being good environmental stewards, her poetry suggests nature models qualities that will benefit us. In other words, Hawken's distinctive vision is in sympathy with ecopoetry's concern that the technological world has devalued nature, but she focuses on the detrimental effect this has on people, rather than on nature, proffering nature as a model that may help to sustain us and help us to cope in a technological age.

In particular, water, trees and stone provide us with positive examples for wellbeing. "The Lake," from *Water, Leaves, Stones* (1995) describes the persistent flow of a river:

but no one has power  
over water, since water  
being fluent  
eventually  
incrementally  
unintentionally wins. (8-13)

The use of 'fluent' to describe water's effortless flow puns on the meaning of that word as an assured use of language. The water's current is personified in terms of verbal argument, aligning the flow of water with human discourse. This poem suggests that despite human technology and exploitation of nature we still do not have power over water, which "eventually... unintentionally wins." The words imply water's indifference, and its strength, providing us with a model of constancy and endurance.

"The Issue of Water" from *Oh THERE You Are TUI!* (2001) describes a river as "an issue of fluency / the mother tongue, the first murmurings" (3-4). Again, the description of water as 'fluent,' or by association 'untroubled,' lends to water a model

of strength supporting Hawken’s theme of a resilient nature in contrast to a less assured human world. “The mother tongue, the first murmurings” suggests that water was here before we were, suggesting constancy. The poem extends this imagery by suggesting that water provides people with emotional sustenance:

the issue of pure silver  
coming as a colour into a dark world and moving

with such force and such beauty that we, standing beside it,  
love what is coming and go willingly where it’s going. (7-10)

These lines suggest water has a positive influence on our emotional wellbeing.

Hawken’s sequence “page : stone : leaf” from *Ocean and Stone* (2015) focuses specifically, and often, on stone as a model of strength and constancy. It includes fourteen poems titled “Stone.” One of these (p.16) declares, “We’re attached to a planet of ocean and stone” (10) evoking a primal connection between people, sea and stone. Another, also titled “Stone” (p.7) declares

stone is the firmness  
in the world. It offers landfall,  
a hand-hold, reception. It is  
a founding father with a mother tongue. (7-10)

Again, Hawken refers to stone – thereby nature – as being here before us: “the mother tongue.” In this poem the imagery is expanded, with stone also described as “a founding father.” ‘Stone,’ then, is characterized as both a physical connection to terra firma, proffering strength, and as that which comes before human language – the first thing we know – offering nature’s constancy. The poem also extends Hawken’s theme of an enduring nature by contemplating the geographical age of the earth:

See that line of coast . . .  
See the ranges ranging . . .

they seem to be



saying

after you,

after you,

after all . . . (15-21)

The poem's final line: "after all," echoes its first line: "After all, stones remember." A stone's "life" is longer than a human's – it endures over long expanses of time – but this poem seems to suggest that stone, and by extension earth – the planet – is more enduring than humanity as a whole. This notion counters both the popular image of apocalypse – an androcentric vision of earth destroyed by humanity – and ecopoetry's predominant image of human-caused environmental degradation. Instead, it extends Hawken's ecocentric theme of a nature more enduring than people to its logical conclusion: stone was here before us, and stone will be here after we are gone. The notion is also suggested in "The Lake." Its lines: "no one has power / over water" which "eventually... wins," implies water's endurance beyond human endurance.

But, more than just noting the endurance of stone – and by extension nature – beyond any human scale or effect, sometimes Hawken suggests nature's resilience offers a model to us. "Afterword: The Company of Stones" from *One Shapely Thing* (2006), suggests stone has a supportive effect on people:

However much we love their density  
don't let's be precious about stones.  
They keep lying on earth as hosts

to each falling and rising nation.  
It is time, 2001, to hold them,  
our common sense, our striking lost souls,

and to be absorbed by sounding out  
their long, composed, absolute story. (19-26)

The collection contains poems and prose journals written during the months after the New York 9/11 terrorist attacks. The above poem's reference to 2001 situates it in that particular historical time and place, which is a backdrop for its subject matter. In this context, stone represents resilience in the face of human-made destruction. It models permanency and composure in an increasingly fraught and hostile human world.

Trees also feature as a model of strength in Hawken's work. "Hope" from *Water, Leaves, Stones* describes how reflecting on the growth habits of trees might help us through grief. It compares their regrowth after being washed away in a slip with the human struggle to outgrow sorrow. Despite "the great slip in the valley: where there is nothing left" (15-16), trees must "wait / in the low gut of the gully / for water, wind and seeds" (19-21). Their steadfast patience after tumult models strength at a time of mourning:

since of all creatures  
they know the most  
about waiting, and waiting  
and slowly strengthening,  
is the great thing  
in grief, we can do?

It is always bleak  
at the beginning  
but trees are calm  
about nothing  
which they believe  
will give rise to something  
flickering and swaying  
as they are: so lucid  
is their knowledge of green. (25-34)

The poem suggests that trees are better able to deal with distress than we are, and that observing their regenerative abilities may help us to recover. It suggests trees model integrity and self-esteem. The poem does not focus on the vulnerability or demise of trees as suggested in much ecopoetry,<sup>2</sup> but in fact suggests trees model ways for us to cope in stressful situations.

In “Helping Hands” from *Garden Poems* (2004), Hawken’s speaker contemplates the ways in which a protected tree models resilience. In the final stanza, she reflects on the oak tree in Wellington Botanic Garden, which is supported by a human-made crutch:

We love your love of the horizontal.  
We wish that we too  
could fall down in the Garden,  
stay fallen, and still thrive. (6.29-32)

The lines imply a connection between the resilience of the fallen tree, and the human desire for strength in the face of acknowledged frailty. The “Garden” and the “fall” recall Adam and Eve’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. The poem connects the human desire for resilience in the face of adversity with the endurance shown by the fallen tree. That the tree has received protection within the city boundary suggests environmental awareness and appreciation of the scarce amount of nature left in the city, providing this poem with an implicit context that could easily lead to rhetoric about our failure to preserve nature. Instead, Hawken’s focus is on what the tree offers us as a model, rather than on our failures as environmental stewards.

A suggestion that technology and industrialization harm people by taking us away from nature is apparent in Hawken’s poems about New York where nature’s

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, W.S. Merwin’s “The Last One” in *Lice* (1967), Wendell Berry’s “Dark With Power” in *Openings* (1965) and Gary Snyder’s “Marin-An” in *The Back Country* (1971).

presence is subsumed by technology. “Traces of Hope” from *It Has No Sound and is Blue* (1987) describes life in the city as so demanding that “we are totally preoccupied baring and clenching our teeth” (7-8). The poem finds that while “the traffic drones on, with us in it” (9) human minds seek refuge in an image of the sky, although

it’s only in dreams that we are swinging  
from place to place on a rope through the sky  
we love because it has no sound and is blue. (11-13)

As reviewer Janet Wilson notes, the collection’s title – taken from the above extract – “metaphorically celebrat(es) silence” and “also signifies the need for newly minted sounds originating from nature rather than the metropolis” (1). She says Hawken’s poem tells us “we love” the image of swinging on a rope beneath a clear sky “because the clamour of traffic is absent” (1). In the poem’s urban space, a mental image of nature offers solace to city-dwellers.

The sixteen-sonnet sequence “Writing Home,” from the same collection, suggests that we should turn to the natural world for a model of resilience, since we are less enduring than nature and stand to lose from its demise. Hawken draws parallels – and distinctions – between trees lining city streets and the homeless people who live on them. Sonnet 2 observes the way New York’s homeless people cope with city life by adjusting their routines according to the distinct North American seasons. By withdrawing in winter and emerging again in spring, their lives appear to parallel the seasonal changes in the trees: “It’s October and the deciduous trees / and the homeless people I know are wrenching / me into their exposed tenacious lives” (1-3). While the homeless people “in their thick coats. Already / ... dream of spring” (8-9), “The trees though go on as usual accepting everything / like the holy creatures we’d love but fear to be” (11-12). The trees provide a model of resilience: “Let’s excel

ourselves, they say, let's set the world alight / before the long clenched collective withdrawal" (13-14).

However, while the trees grow normally, the homeless people struggle to live in exile within the human community. By juxtaposing their lives with the trees, Hawken reveals the estrangement and displacement suffered by some city dwellers in opposition to nature's composure even in an urban environment. For example, sonnet 10 observes that while the urban environment is stressful to the speaker, it does not affect the trees:

The sirens, the long echoing boom in the sky,

the angry traffic, made no impression on them, and I stood there,  
as still as they were, acutely aware of my human breathing. (6-8)

The speaker finds that "too many people had given up" (10). But the deciduous trees, although bare of leaves and trapped as people are within the urban maelstrom, offer hope. "I decided" (11), she says "that their outstretched branches were not, / as they seemed, an empty gesture, but a sign of life" (13-14). These lines indicate what Wilson describes as Hawken's "belief in nature as a source of hope whose proffered moments of revelation, unpredictable as bird-song, she anticipates and prepares for" (3). They suggest that in a technological age where nature and people are equally victims, people may find examples of fortitude to sustain them by paying attention to such elements of nature.

Sonnet 16 compares the emergence of leaves on the New York trees in spring with the actions of a homeless woman called Martha. The trees are "calm" and have the time to spend all day on attending to their leaves. This sits in contrast to the speed with which Martha has to act, elevating nature's tranquility over human competitiveness as a model for behaviour.

This morning, the sun over Queens

has turned the river into a field of undeniably  
light diamonds and the bright oaks,

which seem to have risen out of it,  
look calm enough to waste the whole day

handling their excitable new leaves.  
I wish you could have seen the speed

with which Martha, a mass of silver bangles  
shining on her wrists, sneaked the last

chunk of chocolate ice cream out of the trash,  
off the stick, and into her old mouth. (4-14)

The “mass of silver bangles / shining on her wrists” mirrors the way the morning sun makes the river shine like “a field of undeniably / light diamonds.” The pairing of these images contrasts a human need to have things, when all the “diamonds” we need (life’s true riches) are there on the water, in nature. Like the “bright oaks,” Martha finds joy in the arrival of spring. But her excitement at finding ice cream in a rubbish bin degrades her humanity while the oaks’ “handling their excitable new leaves” renews their dignity. The contrast between the reactions of Martha and the trees to the arrival of spring suggest that contemplating nature offers us a perspective on what we have lost. Wilson, in her review of *Oh There You Are Tui!*, describes how Hawken “relates her emotions to the different moods and energies of the natural world; and charts the hope [the natural world] offers by opening her eyes to the essence of things” (3). This lends to her poetry the “capacity to suggest resolutions to the despair and perplexities that beset us” (6). In this way, Hawken’s nature models hope to people struggling to cope in a technological age.

Although the nature in Hawken’s poems is encroached upon by human impact, it is not usually portrayed as a victim. Instead, it often demonstrates endurance and offers support to a human world in confusion or crisis. Compared to the lives of New

York's homeless people, the 9/11 attacks, and the human struggle to come to terms with death, Hawken's nature is calm and assured. It models solidity, regeneration, constancy and self-possession.

In sum, if Hawken's work at times offers a mainstream eco-poetics in her concern with human encroachment on nature, her portrayal of water, trees and stone as composed and resilient in the midst of human chaos proffers nature as a model of composure and resilience rather than mere victim of industrialization. These poems suggest that if we pay closer attention to nature we may be able to replicate these states of being within ourselves, since we are as much victims of our cities as nature is.

## **Hawken and Romanticism**

Hawken takes up eco-poetic concerns about human encroachment on nature, but the ramifications for her are different from what is seen in much eco-poetry. The interconnection she sees between humans and the environment is not based on an ecological cycle of interdependence, as polemical eco-poetry often describes, but rather speaks of an association between the external world of natural landscape and the internal worlds of consciousness and emotion. While acknowledging nature is influenced by human action, Hawken suggests people are predisposed to nature's influence – not only its physical presence but chiefly, its effect on human consciousness – that is, the way we think and feel about ourselves and our emotional responses to the world.

The links she suggests between nature and consciousness echoes the poetic tradition of the Romantic period when “leading writers were particularly preoccupied with the relationship between the natural world and the individual mind” (*Broadview*,

LI). Romantic writers viewed nature as being in possession of qualities that affected our states of mind and emotions. British Romantic poets explored this connection at a time of increasing industrialization and urban drift, the privatization of common land following the 1809 Enclosure Act, and the destabilizing influence of the French Revolution. While writing in the context of these environmental, social and political changes, the Romantic “focus was much more often on what non-human nature had to offer to the individual human soul than on how humans in aggregate were reshaping the natural world” (*Broadview, LI*). In John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” for example, the nightingale’s singing is a catalyst for the speaker to imagine a happier and more sustaining life. The birdsong is compared to wine that makes him forget “The weariness, the fever, and the fret / Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;” (23-4). The physical experience of nature influences his consciousness by enabling him to imagine life beyond ordinary human living, filling him, temporarily at least, with a tranquil joy. Similarly, “It is nature that anchors and ‘frames the measure’ of human feelings” (149) in the *Lyrical Ballads*, argues critic Scott McEathron. Coleridge’s poem “The Nightingale,” for example, highlights “the almost subjective qualities of nature – its active powers of ‘joyance’ and replenishment for those willing to ‘surrender,’” (148). McEathron argues that Wordsworth’s “The Tables Turned,” describes the “‘Spontaneous wisdom’ to be found in the natural world,” (149):

One impulse from a vernal wood  
 May teach you more of man,  
 Of moral evil and of good  
 Than all the sages can. (21-4)

And Wordsworth’s “Lines Written in Early Spring” – “To her fair works did nature link / The human soul that through me ran” (5-6) – suggests that “nature’s truths may be instinctively felt (150). Of “Tintern Abbey,” McEathron says, “Wordsworth



finds, through and within nature, an elemental power that both awakens the human mind and follows from it” (154). In these ways, the Romantic poets drew connections between nature and the way people felt about themselves and their lives, suggesting that by paying attention to nature it was possible to change their attitude or state of mind.

The notion is continued in Hawken’s work through her portrayal of nature as a model of composure and resilience in a technological world, and through her poetics. That is, her sense of nature and human responses to it, implicit in her interpretative description – her images and metaphors, which describe the ways in which the natural world affects how her speakers feel about themselves and their lives.

Accordingly, her themes and poetics frequently align with the definition of ecopoetry offered by British academic Jonathan Bate. As I noted earlier, Bate argues ecopoetry is an “afterlife” (252) of Romanticism. He contends that the purpose of ecopoetry is not, as Rueckert proposed, and as further argued by Bryson and Thompson, to effect social change through polemical persuasion, but rather, “must concern itself with consciousness” (266). He maintains that rhetorically persuasive ecopoetry does not achieve what he calls “ecopoiesis,” because it does not engage with our imaginations. Hence, he believes (rather stringently) that polemical ecopoetry is not ecopoetry at all because “The role of ecopoiesis ... is to engage *imaginatively* with the non-human” (199). For example, as mentioned earlier, Bate says of Gary Snyder’s rhetorical poem, “Mother Earth: Her Whales:”

The poem has been written as an expression of a set of opinions, not as an attempt to transform into language an experience of dwelling upon the earth. In this respect, it is not what I call an ‘ecopoem’: it is not thinking of the questions of the making of the *oikos*” (200).

Accordingly, Bate says ecopoetry should rightly be defined as poetry from the Romantic period and beyond that meditates on the link between nature and consciousness, rather than being limited to poetry that acknowledges contemporary environmental concerns.

Bate's concept of "ecopoiesis" is based on the ideas of German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). In her essay "Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis," Kate Rigby discusses "the specifically Heideggerian model of *ecopoiesis* developed by Jonathan Bate in the final chapter of *The Song of the Earth*" (428). She says Heidegger argues that much of nature has been reduced to what he calls 'standing reserve,' "a forestry term which construes the forest as so much wood waiting to be extracted, utterly available and infinitely manipulable," (429). Heidegger's idea of poiesis – by which he means to dwell, or live by "creating and caringly maintaining a place of habitation" (430) – is not to transform nature through social domination or economic exploitation but rather to "let things be in their obscure otherness" (430). Bate's description of 'ecopoiesis' as "a *poiesis* (Greek 'making') of the *oikos* (Greek 'home' or 'dwelling-place')" (245), and his contention that "ecopoetics should begin not as a set of assumptions or proposals about particular environmental issues, but as a way of reflecting on what it might mean to dwell with the earth," (266) recall Heidegger's notion of living with nature.

Bate says that whereas "the biologist, the geographer and the Green activist have *narratives* of dwelling, a poem may be a *revelation* of dwelling" (266). One way of achieving this, he says, is through poetry that generates empathy between people and place, as he suggests the Romantics do – arguing, in *Romantic Ecology* (1991), that these poets "started a tradition of environmental consciousness" (9).

For instance, in *The Song of the Earth*, 2000, Bate calls Wordsworth an ecopoet because his naming of places in poetry, and fidelity to them – his regionalism – generates sympathy between people and the environment: “Stay true to the pull of the spot as opposed to the nation and you have a longing for belonging that is the essence of ecopoiesis,” ( 212). He says, for example, “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” achieves ecopoiesis – that is, it connects a natural place with our perception of how we live with nature – because it links place to the speaker’s consciousness, and thereby the individual, to the natural world.

In the poem, the speaker – returning to the River Wye after an absence – considers how memories of the river and its surroundings produced:

that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world  
Is lighten’d – (39-43)

By showing the beneficial effects of nature on a consciousness made dismal by urban commerce, Bate says Wordsworth “turns to the psychological work which nature can do for alienated urban man” (146). In the poem, the speaker continues to reflect on nature’s effect on his state of mind:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense of sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. (96-105)

Bate says of this extract, “By turning from sight to sound and feeling, and thence to the temporal dimension of memory, [Wordsworth] connects his consciousness to the ecosystem” (147). “Tintern Abbey” fits Bate’s definition of ecopoetry because it

describes changes in the subjectivity of its speaker (his consciousness) due to the presence and memory of nature.

As mentioned earlier, John Clare is another Romantic poet whom Bate calls an eco-poet. Some of Clare's poems describe an altered subjectivity in his speaker due to the absence of familiar natural surroundings. In "Sonnet [I am]," for example, his speaker describes the feeling of having lost his sense of identity after shifting location: "I feel I am; – I only knew I am, / And plod upon the earth, as dull and void:" (1-2). In "The Flitting," Clare again internalizes nature's loss:

I've left mine own old home of homes  
Green fields & every pleasant place  
The summer like a stranger comes  
I pause & hardly know her face  
I miss the hazels happy green  
The bluebells quiet hanging blooms  
Where envy's sneer was never seen  
Where staring malice never comes. (1-8)

An unfamiliar external environment upsets the speaker's equanimity: "the summer like a stranger comes." He regards his new surroundings as maliferous, in opposition to his feelings about his old place: "where envy's sneer was never seen / Where staring malice never comes." Bate's reading of Clare finds that the poet "gained his identification through his bond with his native landscape and lost it in madness when he was displaced from that land," (1991, 54). He defines Clare's poems charting changes in his speaker's subjectivity due to changes in his surrounding landscape as eco-poetic.

In some of her work, Hawken too, connects nature to consciousness through a general suggestion that nature offers solace for those trapped in an industrial setting. Like "Tintern Abbey," Hawken's "Traces of Hope" from *It Has No Sound and is Blue* (1987), turns, as mentioned earlier, to memory of a natural place for consolation from the stress of urban living:

we are totally preoccupied baring  
and clenching our teeth. Either way  
the traffic drones on, with us in it

and it's only in dreams that we are swinging  
from place to place on a rope through the sky  
we love because it has no sound and is blue. (2, 7-12)

This extract describes a willful wish to transform consciousness through “dreams” of nature. The earlier mentioned “The Issue of Water” also suggests water has restorative qualities that positively influence consciousness: “we, standing beside it, / love what is coming and go willingly where it's going.” (9-10). These lines suggest water uplifts us, as the song of the nightingale uplifts the speaker in Keats' poem. In “Talking to a Tree Fern at Lake Rotoiti” from *Oh There You Are Tui!* (2001), Hawken's speaker becomes unsettled and pessimistic after the loss of the familiar tree fern from its natural habitat due to human encroachment. She compares her perception of her own life to its death:

And dignity looks  
to be  
nothing more  
than living and dying  
in your own shape: being  
no more, or less,  
than you are. (10. 17-23)

The extract, which is addressed to the dead tree, suggests Hawken's speaker gains some composure from its form, but, as I will discuss later, its death eventually causes her despondency. While this poem acknowledges the detrimental affects of human activity on nature, its focus is the effect this loss has on its speaker's state of mind.

“The Thought” from *Garden Poems* (2004) also, briefly, acknowledges human caused environmental damage but focuses on the internal consciousness of its speaker as she wanders through Otari-Wilson's Bush. The poem begins with an acknowledgment of deforestation:

On the way I looked out at the steep  
regenerating hillside, the conical tops of rewarewa  
above the dark and bright green trees, and  
on the degenerating crust of the planet  
and in my spirit hope began to grow. (1-5)

The “regenerating hillside” suggests nature reclaiming cleared land and the speaker’s  
mind is also claimed by nature as she observes and names the plants:

On the canopy walkway  
the word emergent took our fancy  
and when we came out  
on the other side and saw  
the formal Cockayne lawn opening out onto the forest  
a small tectonic shift must have happened  
in the layers of my brain. (42-8)

And while I was standing over  
a small-leaved coprosma saying to myself ‘I love those leaves’

I realised that I felt  
and meant exactly  
what I said, and a thought  
like a dark-backed, silver-bellied fish  
slipped through my mind and was gone. (51-7)

In these extracts, the speaker self-consciously contemplates the effects of nature on  
her state-of-mind. By the end of the poem, nature’s influence has overtaken her  
thoughts and she declares:

It is time to admit myself  
to the crowd of human beings  
who know that, strangely,  
in both body and spirit,  
we are inseparable from trees. (91-5)

The effect of nature on her consciousness as she walks through the bush causes her to  
evaluate her feelings for nature and to express her connection with it. The poem’s  
focus is the speaker’s perceptual connection with nature at the level of consciousness,

following in the tradition of Romanticism, rather than on an ecopolemic argument about the effects of deforestation.

### **Tension between polemic and perception**

Though I have worked to show what differentiates Hawken's poetry from much ecopoetry, some of the same concerns that drive polemical ecopoetry lie behind hers as well. I am particularly interested in the way Hawken negotiates the tension between polemic, which is marked by rhetoric, that is, literal description and assertion, and poetry of perception. In my own work I am struggling to respond to nature in perceptive ways, and to overcome the tendency towards polemic, which is usually less engaging.

I was interested to hear Hawken draw attention to her struggle to engage polemic, at the Working with Nature Conference in Palmerston North in 2014. She said she was particularly pleased that "The Uprising" – a poem now included in *Ocean and Stone* (2015) – was named in *Best NZ Poems 2014* because it was "both a personal and political poem" (speech notes, 1). Her admission indicated that she felt its inclusion signalled success at incorporating polemic into her poetry. I am curious to understand how the poem achieves this.

"The Uprising" is divided into seven numbered parts of four stanzas each, a separation that permits it to make sudden shifts in tone and language, signalled by movement from one section to another. It ends with a change in the attitude of its speaker in response to the environmental issues raised. This is one way it connects the political to the personal. Another way is by locating the speaker in relation to global issues. The speaker is introduced at the end of the first part:

On Tuvalu the ocean is rising, in San Francisco  
the ocean is rising, in Sydney the ocean is

rising, in Nagoya the ocean is rising

and here, in Paekakariki, outside my window  
the Tasman Sea, moon-bound, rises and falls.  
It breaks up on the sea wall and falls. (1.7-12)

The repeated statements about oceans rising become specific when the Tasman Sea is named and located in relation to the speaker: “outside my window / the Tasman Sea, moon-bound, rises and falls.” The second stanza (above) engages us with the sea because the speaker now has a stake in it. She is living near where it is held back by “the sea wall,” suggesting any rise in the sea level may have personal consequences. This makes the universal issue of rising sea levels specific to the speaker. The speaker’s perception of the sea: “moon-bound, rises and falls” is more engaging than the statements in the first stanza, which are a polemic against climate change.

The second part of the poem alternates statements about ocean pollution with suggestions that the ocean – and by implication what we put in it – is closely connected to New Zealand:

The land is like a fish.  
The fish of Maui, hauled up from the sea floor, writhing.

The ocean is a road, a table, a bed.  
It takes our bodies up to air and floats them.  
The ocean is an open question.

The ocean is an open sewer. (2.2-7)

Now the description of New Zealand as a fish provides the image of the country swimming in a sewer. The polemic of this stanza is manifested by the declarative assertion: “The ocean is an open sewer.” However, its rhetoric is mitigated by the metaphors that describe the sea in ways that allow us to imagine it as a part of our lives: “a road, a table, a bed. / It takes our bodies up to air and floats them.” This imagery portrays the speaker’s subjective experience of the ocean.



In part 3, Hawken combines statements about the effects of rising sea levels on Pacific Islanders with subtle personification of the sea. Here are the first and fourth stanzas of that section:

In Santiago the Pacific is rising,  
in Majuro the Pacific is rising:  
people leave when they cannot stay. (3.1-3)

Today the sea came gently to the sea wall  
and pulled back into itself  
in the overall global uprising. (3.10-12)

The statement about human caused environmental catastrophe – people being forced from their homes – is juxtaposed with the personification of the sea in the sense that Hawken seems to give it agency: “the sea came gently to the sea wall / and pulled back into itself.” This imagines the sea as acting kindly and in a protective manner. The final phrase “overall global uprising” implies rebellion by nature. It subtly raises Hawken’s persistent theme of nature’s endurance and resilience in the face of human spoliation.

The third stanza from part 3 uses statements made of prosaic, or everyday, language to name explicit examples of human caused environmental degradation:

Fishing nets on the high seas are fifty kilometres long.  
In the freedom of the high seas  
a mass killing goes on, expertly, and on. (3. 7-9)

The sentence “Fishing nets on the high seas are fifty kilometres long” could be plucked from a reference book or encyclopedic website about fishing. The next lines, “In the freedom of the high seas / a mass killing goes on, expertly, and on” uses emotive language to criticize this fishing method. “Freedom” suggests a place of autonomy, liberty and self-determination. In contrast, “mass killing” and “expertly” suggest a clinical slaughter. They transform the preceding sentence, “Fishing nets on the high seas are fifty kilometres long” from a statement of fact to a condemnation.

These extracts create emotive polemic against ocean pollution and commercial fishing by ocean trawlers. “Mass killing” calls upon associations of the many historical examples of human genocide, but it is a literal description as well of what commercial fishing entails. The expository language of these lines, with their polemical and rhetorical force, calls on literal description and thus stands in contrast to the figurative nature of the description of the ocean as “table,” “bed,” and “open question.” This contrast shows a tension in the poem between an interest in the lyric’s tendency to imaginative transformation and the rhetorical assertion of polemical ecopoetry.

In part 4, Hawken continues her depiction of a the sea as compassionate – “the whole / indivisible ocean fits over the earth like a blessing” (4.1-2) – and as powerful:

It shows up outside my window and,  
though spellbound is moon-bound, is unbound  
with a swell and momentum of its own. (4.7-9)

Hawken’s ocean is strong yet restrained, in comparison to our treatment of it: “we, its offspring, resourceful / and distracted, give back plastic and acid.” (3.5-6). The stanza suggests that while the ocean has the power to overwhelm us, it holds back, in opposition to the way in which people wield their power over it through over-fishing or pollution. Again, this reveals the impulse toward polemic. The depiction of the ocean as benevolent rather than vulnerable, in the face of human degradation, continues Hawken’s theme of nature as model for, rather than mere victim of, human behaviour.

In part 5, Hawken uses figurative language to describe this country:

The land is like a knife, out  
of its sheath and glinting in the sun. (5.7-8)

This is an imaginative, lyric image. It lends perceptive power to the notion of the country's location surrounded by ocean. The proceeding lines use the figurative image of the knife in a rhetorical manner:

I'd like to hold that pointed knife.  
I'd like to speak with that knife.  
I'd like to save a home, a tribe  
and a heritage with that knife. (5.9-12)

The naming of "a home," "a tribe," and "a heritage" are universal descriptions and the list resembles diatribe in the familiar manner of polemic ecopoetry which is concerned with trying to "save" the natural world from human exploitation. This stanza suggests a general and universal need to save people who are threatened by the effects of a technological age. As such, it is overtaken by the impulse towards polemic.

In the following extract from part 6a, the speaker projects an attitude of weakness and hopelessness:

All I can do is plant,  
all I can do is vote  
for the fish, the canoe, the ocean  
  
to survive the rise and fall.  
All I can do is plead,  
all I can do is call ... (6a.7-10)

But in the final part, 6b, the speaker's attitude changes to defiance and optimism:

I'm getting warmer like the ocean  
with this thin-bladed knife. (6b.1-2)  
  
I vote with the hand that holds  
  
this knife. I vote for the fish, the bird,  
the ocean and a raised land shaped  
by explosion, erosion and wilful life. (6b.9-12)

It is possible to read 6a and 6b as alternative endings. Hawken is offering a choice: we can adopt either an attitude of defeat or an attitude of hope. The latter, with the phrases “the hand that holds this knife” and “wilful life,” involves taking action. Both are asserted by the speaker with the verbs ‘do’ and ‘vote’ and as such are polemical statements.

To my mind, the most successful aspects of the poem are when the speaker has a personal stake in the global issue of rising sea levels and when metaphors – imaginative transformation – are used to personify the ocean. At times, when the personal overtakes the political, the poem provides a sense that something specific is at stake here – the wellbeing of the speaker as well as the ocean. At other times, including the first-person endings with declarative statements such as “All I can do is rally, / all I can do is write” (6a. 3-4) and “I’m a full-time / mother with a fish wife’s tongue” (6b. 2-3), the poem disengages with the imagination. It appears that in the poem’s final lines, Hawken self-consciously employs assertion to suggest action. She appears to at times work toward the use of figurative language but tends to back off, such that the rhetorical overtakes the figurative. This poem offers an example of her efforts to engage the tension between the rhetoric of polemic and the figurative lyric imagination.

In another poem in the same collection, “The lake, the bloke and the bike,” figurative and rhetorical language are alternated to contrast differing descriptions of natural and human worlds. The poem’s narrative describes the reaction of its poet speaker and her surroundings to a boat owner at a peaceful lake. For observations of the man with the boat, Hawken uses literal description – “The bloke who cannot live / without noise is revving up the motor / on his hydroplaning boat” (2.4-6) – and assertion: “His boat is the loudest I have heard.” (2.9). For descriptions of the natural

environment she turns to the figurative – “honeycomb shapes,” “another, legendary, story:”

From the shore  
the small lines keep coming  
toward me on the diagonal  
making honeycomb shapes on the sand.  
His boat is the loudest I’ve ever heard.  
It is tested in and out of the water.  
It is tested for hours.  
Through the honeycomb a small swell  
parallel to the shore, rises and falls  
telling another, legendary, story. (2.8-17)

In this extract, the combination of rhetoric and figure depict the speaker’s perception of the human world as literal and declarative. However, her perception of the natural world is attuned to imagination and perception, such as the passage of life over time, as opposed to the immediacy of the present that concerns the boat owner.

At the end of the poem, Hawken’s speaker meditates on the lake’s reaction to “the bloke” who is “hurtling around / on a drive-on mower” (6.6-7) – which may be a different machine or a figurative way of describing (in mocking terms) the boat:

Meanwhile—the lake has the calm  
of a dark, enlightened mind:  
  
nothing appears to be broken,  
  
everything settled is fragile,  
  
nothing seems likely to break. (6.16-20)

In contrast to the declarative statement: “The bloke is hurtling around / on a drive-on mower,” descriptions of the lake are figurative: “nothing appears to be broken /

everything settled is fragile / nothing seems likely to break.” These images suggest the lake, and by extension nature, is in a tenuous position in relation to human intrusion, but is resilient. The speaker perceives the natural world as calm, enlightened and, although fragile, composed. In contrast, the poem implies that in the world of human technology things, such as nature, get broken. But by perceiving nature in figurative terms, and the human in descriptive terms, Hawken’s speaker empathises with nature by being connected to it through perception. This poem engages the tension between polemic and imagination and is balanced in favour of figure versus statement. Because of this balance, it directs Hawken’s environmental concerns away from rhetoric and towards how the threat to nature affects consciousness, thereby connecting nature and consciousness in the Romantic manner.

Earlier poems, “Talking to a Tree Fern” from *It Has No Sound and is Blue* (1987) and its companion poem “Talking to a Tree Fern at Lake Rotoiti” from *Oh THERE You Are TUI! New and Selected Poems* (2001), describe a change in the speaker’s consciousness as she comprehends the personal implications of the loss of tree ferns from their natural habitat. These poems explicitly reference human impact on the natural environment. Like Clare’s “Sonnet [I am]” the speaker’s internal state is disturbed by changes to the external landscape.

The first of these twin poems, “Talking to a Tree Fern,” finds the tree fern losing its habitat:

Rowing out as usual  
to the calmest part of the lake  
I hear a chain-saw preening itself  
and sense the spikes stiffening on your trunks. (pt. 7)

This poem addresses tree ferns as they negotiate survival amid encroaching human enterprise. The attachment of the bird-like verb ‘preening’ to the chainsaw suggests the speaker’s sense of humans as vain and predatory. Comparison of the human to a

bird and personification of the tree fern as it reacts by ‘stiffening’ juxtaposes the human presence with the natural world and the natural world with the human. This strategy foregrounds the tree fern in the familiar manner of ecocentrism: that is, the natural world is portrayed as important in its own right. The poem reflects on the beauty of the tree fern while considering how its habitat is under threat from water sports and exotic trees. It notes the New Zealand native is surrendered by gardeners and exported as feature plants for overseas gardens. Ultimately, the tree fern answers back. In the final stanza, it has been brought into the city and made into a plank in a ponga fence:

Suddenly, in the city,  
staked into a neat fence  
you poke out your black tongue. (pt. 12)

The black tongue evokes the image of a carved Maori figure. It situates the poem in post-colonial New Zealand, paralleling the plight of the tree fern with the situation of Maori. Under British colonialism, Maori culture was at risk of being reduced to artifacts and ornaments, like the decorative ponga in the fence. But the defiant gesture suggests that nature, like Maori, is resilient and will not easily relinquish its birthright to this country. Here, we see, as indicated earlier, nature as a model of resilience.

The poem grants the tree fern a rebellious riposte that lightens the gravity of its situation. However, a complementary poem written fourteen years later, “Talking to a Tree Fern at Lake Rotoiti” follows a dystopian course. It describes total human encroachment into the tree fern’s native habitat. In the first poem, speed boats in the bay behind the tree fern “force their vibrations right up / your root-tips (7-8). But in “Talking to a Tree Fern at Lake Rotoiti” “the whole bay / has lawns mown right down / to the elegant curve of the beach” (38-40). Tui, heron and rata are memories; heron and mamaku – the Maori name for tree fern – “are in the permanent collection”

(44), implying they are relics in a museum. This shift suggests a further loss of indigenous species and culture in post-colonial New Zealand.

In this second poem, Hawken suggests that the loss of the tree fern is not just an ecological tragedy. She goes further by suggesting how its loss affects her speaker's emotional state and ultimately causes a shift towards a more pessimistic outlook. In this way, the poem uses subjective perception to continue the Romantic tradition of contemplating the effects of the external world on human consciousness:

I don't know if you are dying  
or if you are dead.  
.....  
O god at the top  
not a glimpse of green  
not even a fist  
not a hint  
of the clench  
before flight. (pt. 2)

The phrase "O god" and the repeated negatives: "not," "not even" and "not a hint," project an element of panic in the speaker's voice. The tree fern's existence resonates with significance for the speaker that was perhaps not fully realised, or at least not explicated, in the earlier poem. Lines from the earlier poem are repeated and then transformed into a more somber ending. In the earlier poem, the speaker's life is compared to the rata climbing "quietly" up the tree fern's trunk:

Under your dark arms  
that night with no moon  
I decided to let my life  
climb up quietly  
like the rata on your trunk. (pt. 10)

But in the second poem, there is no mention of the rata and the speaker fails to find an aspect of the natural world to relate her life to:

Under your dark arms  
that night with no moon



I decided to let my life climb up  
quietly – and I have, I have

but now we're afraid of  
quietly, we drive and drive  
and do not see  
the graceful things  
that lift us up, with such definition,  
to our own gracefulness. (pt. 11)

The speaker struggles for words, repeating the affirmative “I have, I have” with what seems like desperation. Finally, she reluctantly acknowledges her fear of finding that the tree fern has gone. She reflects on the personal significance of the tree fern and extends this to the effect of the loss of nature on human lives generally:

In the city  
when the traffic is thundering past  
shaking the ground  
and loosening all our roots  
you will remind me  
that a lake  
descends  
into its dark stone  
and becomes exquisite.

I will remember  
that a lake  
when the most calm  
is the most moving

and you will remind me  
that even an exceptional thing  
full of grace, in its own shape,  
does not last. (pt. 13)

The speaker is left with only the memory of the tree fern. Its loss appears to parallel a corresponding change in her attitude – from a calm and positive approach to the future (“I decided to let my life / climb up quietly / like the rata on your trunk”) to a state of anxiety (“we drive and drive / and do not see / the graceful things”). This change

in consciousness is a result of the demise of the tree fern, which causes the speaker to shift towards a more pessimistic outlook.

Use of the word “grace” suggests nature, as represented by the tree fern, models “grace” in a human world that appears to increasingly lack it (“we’re afraid of / quietly”). The term introduces a spiritual dimension that seems to signal an individual, rather than a religious, spirituality. In a review of *Water, Leaves, Stones*, Janet Wilson remarks that Hawken’s “search for new meanings means that communion with nature, an act of grace occurring through a personal, rather than a specifically Christian dispensation, determines her inspiration” (3). In “Talking to a Tree Fern at Lake Rotoiti” ‘grace’ appears to describe a characteristic of the natural world that the human world both lacks and increasingly fails to notice. It suggests that by not paying attention to this aspect of nature, our lives are diminished. Here, we see, as indicated earlier, nature modeling better ways for people to think about their lives.

While the tree fern now lacks resilience, it nevertheless embodies composure that appears to be missing from human lives. The poem meditates on the effect of the loss of the tree fern on human consciousness by showing a shift in the state of mind of the speaker. It moves from an attitude of observation: “I don’t know if you are dying/ or if you are dead.” (2 1-2), to inner turmoil: “I have, I have/ but now we’re afraid of/ quietly, we drive and drive” (11 4-6), to despondency: “even an exceptional thing/ full of grace, in its own shape,/ does not last.” (13 15-17). It meditates on a gradual shift in the speaker’s interior state in response to growing awareness of the implications of the loss of an aspect of her exterior landscape. There is concern here about human encroachment on nature that is typical of ecopoetry – as is the suggestion that nature has suffered. But even in this second poem, the emphasis is less on nature than on the effect on the speaker and by extension humanity. In this way,

the poem engages with the Romantic focus on the way in which nature influences our consciousness by focusing on the speaker's subjective response to nature.

In the second tree fern poem, the speaker's figurative language allows environmental concerns about the loss of the tree fern from its native habitat to focus on an intuitive, rather than a physical, response. In this way, the poem gains the imaginative power of lyric poetry. It is therefore a helpful model for my own work as I endeavor to write poetry that successfully negotiates the tension between lyric perception and rhetoric assertion as I hope will be evident in my collection "Beach River Always" which follows. Hawken's recent poem, "The Uprising" contains useful examples of how the impulse toward polemic is successful when it is mitigated by lyric imagination, such as when the sea is described through the subjective experience of the speaker. "The lake, the bloke and the bike" shows how the tension between polemic and perception can be balanced in favour of the figurative to show empathy between the speaker and nature – in contrast to the speaker's alienation from the world of human technology – and ultimately to connect environmental concern with consciousness. As I explain in the preface to my collection, which follows, I have attempted to employ some of these strategies in my own work.

While Hawken negotiates the tension between polemic on the one hand and lyric perception and emotion on the other, the bulk of her nature poetry avoids the polemic impulse. Her poetry is distinct from mainstream ecopoetry in two important ways. Thematically, it depicts nature as resilient (rather than as a victim of humanity) and as providing a model for how people might better cope in a technological age. And from a poetics perspective, her poetry is distinct from much ecopoetry in that it connects people and nature through consciousness – that is, the emphasis is on its effect on the speaker's emotions and attitudes (often manifested through metaphor).

Hawken's nature affects our states of mind in ways that shift our outlook from optimism to pessimism, and from pessimism to optimism. While some of her work fits into mainstream polemical ecopoetry, most aligns with the definition of ecopoetry proposed by Bate, in that it continues within the tradition of Romanticism. In these poems, then, she continues the Romantic concepts of connection between inner and outer worlds, within the context of contemporary concerns about technology and its effects on the natural environment.

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# **Beach River Always**

**Janet Newman**



## Preface

Hawken's movement between polemic – a mainstream ecopoetic agenda – and a more Romantic style imaginative engagement with nature, which nevertheless suggests a relationship between the human and the nonhuman, is a useful model for my own work. It shows me the distinction between mainstream ecopoetry and ecopoetry which combines environmental alertness with lyric perception. It provides me with strategies for negotiating the tension between polemic and perception, and examples of how to successfully draw a connection between nature and consciousness through the subjective experience of the poet speaker. My own work, as I see it, sometimes falls into mainstream ecopoetry by a tendency towards polemic. There is, to my mind, a place for such poems – ecopoetry of this sort is a recognised genre. But Hawken's work also provides me with examples of how to engage with nature and environmental concerns by more fully using the imaginative and figurative language of lyric poetry, which so often is about consciousness and subjectivity. Her work provides ways to suggest how the natural world influences our perceptions of ourselves and of our states of mind, and how it models better ways for us to behave. At times, it illustrates how to employ polemic to support narrative and theme, and at other times, how to employ figure to mitigate polemic's assertion and rhetoric.

Some of my poems are, therefore, more explicitly ecopoetic in their agenda and aesthetic. My early poem "For the Forgotten," for instance, describes the loss of indigenous plants and birds and the forgetting of certain histories from the area in which I live. It explicitly acknowledges environmental concerns and is marked by the absence of a pronominal speaker with a narrative and hence an explicitly personal stake in the described environment. Another early poem, "The Totara Calls Absence,"

adopts the voice of a felled giant totara to lament the loss of New Zealand's native forests and birds and is also polemic. "At the Flood Plain Farm" has a similar theme and in this case, a first-person speaker who relates her feelings towards environmental losses. Personal revelation perhaps mitigates this poem's explicit descriptions of nature's losses. But many other early poems lack a pronominal speaker, such as "Beach," "And Forth," "River," "lichen," "Lichen," "Still," and "Kereru Primary." Some explicitly describe the effects of human degradation on the environment and portray nature's constancy and resilience, which are persistent themes in Hawken's work.

In others poems though, I have attempted to resist the impulse towards polemic while acknowledging the constructedness of New Zealand's familiar landscapes. "Biking to the Manawatu River" and "Bush Reserve," are predominantly observational and conclude with perception. "Koputaroa, near the Manawatu River" draws into the narrative the notion of a generational loss of interest in nature through the ambivalence of a daughter. The daughter's presence increases, I hope, the speaker's stake in the natural world, mitigating the poem's explicit concern with nature's loss. "Wildebeest" uses rhetoric to describe the twenty-first-century angst of its second-person speaker (or the 'you' may be taken to refer to everyone) and in the final stanza moves to figure to reveal the speaker's perceived anxiety.

Other poems explore the ways in which nature influences our consciousness, which, as the critical essay explains, is a focus of much of Hawken's work, putting it – via Bates – into a Romantic-influenced ecopoetry. In "Kauri," and "Turangawaewae," for instance, nature is valued through a perceptive connection with it and concerns about environmental degradation are implied or absent. "Ducks," "moss," and "Always" suggest that nature models states of mind or behaviours that

might benefit us, as Hawken's nature persistently suggests. "The Huntaway," "Suddenly Rabbit," "The Carrier," "The Shearer," "Nest," "Sparrows," "Bumblebees" and "Flood" have an ecocentric perspective in the sense that they emphasise nature's autonomy and suggest that the natural world is equal in importance to the human world. While environmental concerns are not explicitly acknowledged, these poems suggest nature is important to us, or that we are less important than we think. They move beyond observation to perceptive reflection about human responses to nature in a variety of situations.

The use of these themes and strategies in my work intends to call attention to the ways nature is both devalued in a technological age, and important to us, as we are, as Hawken attests: "in the strange position of being inextricably entangled with the nonhuman world" (speech notes, 1). I have attempted to go beyond merely drawing attention to human impact on the natural world, but rather "to engage *imaginatively* with the non-human" (Bate, 2000, 199). I hope this has produced a thoughtful collection about the relationship between people, nature, poetry, polemic and imagination.

## Beach

Some days the clouds disappear  
on the drive to the coast

the way the things you wanted to say  
evaporate when you get there.

Sentences float to the pencil-line horizon  
between sky that is nothing but blue

and sea that is blue as ...  
but words fail you,

smudge like the fishing boats  
in the distance without your binoculars

or the telescope mounted  
in your absolutely beachfront window,

wash like driftwood  
onto Kapiti's stony shore

where gulls patrol for intruders  
to absolutely beachfront nesting grounds,

or drift to the Sounds  
like discarded plastic

and wrap around mussel-farm ropes  
or catch in cray pots,

loll beneath the surface  
like snapper, gurnard and closer in

in warmer water, kahawai,  
swim out of reach,

or land on wet sand  
netted, filleted, discarded.

Trawlers tear subjects from verbs,  
drag contexts out to deeper water.

Soon the miles of driftwood on the beach  
looks just like washed up words,

the ones you wanted to use  
*pristine untrammelled calming*

but found were of no use  
although they seemed elegant

lying in your mind the way driftwood  
shaped like big fish swimming reclines in gardens

but is truly uprooted trees  
floated down the river, drained of colour,

pummeled until smooth  
and left on the high water line to dry

like the words you wanted to say,  
jetsam on the tide.

## At the Flood Plain Farm

Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year, / Will learn the trick of standing upright here.  
“The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch,” Allen Curnow.

The ground shudders  
as cattle trample past.

Peat sinks and swells  
around perimeters of kahikatea stumps

gouged by hooves.  
I could lie inside

their soft centres.  
Roots thick as limbs

dredged by the digger  
bleach like bones in the sun.

A pukeko strides  
towards the shelterless drain

white tail feathers  
buffeted by wind.

The rolling hills,  
an easy sea of grass,

shine like oiled hair.  
This land steams with sweat.

After the Wairau Affray  
and the 1855 earthquake

Paiaka settlers abandoned  
the riverbank mill, moved

downstream to Te Awahou  
or bought farm allotments.

South to Hokio  
they named Mt Robinson block.

With handsaw, shovel and axe  
they 'broke it in,'

learnt the trick of cross-sawing  
the patient trunks,

dragged them out  
with bullock team and jigger board,

would have heard  
tui, kereru, saddleback sounding

through the canopy  
of marvellous kahikateas

that stood  
where I stand upright here.

## Lichen

Once you see it  
it is everywhere

like a ghost, gravity  
tugging a cloud,

something from nothing,  
nothing from air.

They say it means  
you have good air.

They don't mean  
a good ear

but clear  
like a high note

sung on that hill  
and carried across the gully

to here when the wind is right  
or there is no wind at all.

It grows to the top  
of the concrete power pole,

yellow paw prints climbing up.  
From the wooden crossbars

aquamarine whiskers  
test the air.

From there you can see  
over the plain to Kapiti,

Tuteremoana rising  
from the sea.



## Biking to the Manawatu River

Nothing that meets the eye on a New Zealand coastal plain that has been the subject of a swamp drainage scheme is yet a century old.... Yet the recognisable combination of trees, pasture and human structures makes it seem perhaps as if they are all that was ever here.

Geoff Park, *Theatre Country. Essays on landscape & whenua.*

A stand of kahikatea about halfway along –  
twelve or fifteen impoverished trees  
rising out of the paddock, taller than power poles,

leaves like curled hair arranged in conical shapes,  
organized and plain but beautiful  
against the plain of grass.

Their roots are twisted clumps,  
tangles of rope, knots, freckled with lichen.  
Toeholds on the earth,

they seem to have wrenched up like memory  
but the water-sapped peat has sunk  
baring them to the weather.

At the end of the track, the stopbank rears,  
a wall of grass. East it goes towards the Tararuas,  
west towards the coast.

The top is flat and wide enough to ride two abreast.  
The wind belts our sides and spokes.  
Below, another fifty metres or so of grass

unnaturally flat – the digger must have taken soil from here  
for the bank. A two-wire and post electric fence  
runs roughly parallel to the edge.

Further along, a cut. The earth is heaped  
in a ragged pile, Californian thistle  
and buttercup holding it down.

Around the perimeter, a flat track scraped with the bucket –  
you can see its teeth marks.  
A hole's been dug.

Water pools in the bottom  
below metal floodgates rusting into the bank.  
The drain marks a straight line south.

The river hurries past,  
a fast-flowing conveyor,  
its surface opaque,

rough-sawn like the pine posts  
but more brown –  
like scattered feathers of a car-killed *kahu*, swamp harrier.

lichen

appears like  
a spreading stain a rising graph  
a hidden door on a familiar path  
pale like fresh  
cream platinum ragged like a wreath  
you can't hear it like the h  
in whale like the breath  
out like (the breath  
)in but you say it  
with the hard h between your teeth  
like loch taste the metal in your mouth

## For the Forgotten

The brick Post Office is gone, burned, or buried in Hokio Beach Road landfill.  
Once I skipped up the stone steps, pressed my nose to the wide kahikatea counter.  
The smells of linseed oil and rubber stamps are gone too  
although sometimes a leaf fallen from pollarded plane trees grounded in asphalt,  
blown up from the gutter by the woosh of tyres, throws up the old scents.  
I hold my breath through New World petrol station and carpark like a bitumen lake  
recalling stories of eels thick as exhaust pipes hauled from Lake Horowhenua.  
There's a fummy smell. At the water's edge algae blooms like florid pillows.  
The prevailing westerly perfumes the streets with the unmistakable odour of waste.  
Last week the Peace Gates were found in a backyard supporting dogberry and witch's brier.  
Each night, glass poppies spill their ruddy light over a concrete dais.  
South-west, immemorialised Kapiti looms lest we forget  
where Te Rauparaha landed, the beaches red as Flanders.  
Grass sheets the floodplains where green cathedral kahikatea spired clouds of tui.  
Rain wets the waxy brassicas and polishes the railway track  
that signalled the forest's passing.  
Lake Papaitonga sang with birdsong and the birdman himself,  
a knife and fork at his dissecting table. Buller Road is smooth as his ironed sleeve,  
a manicured hand of land, cuticles of bush pushed back, pushed back, filed, clipped, shaped,  
houses lacquer and buff, birds-eye to the lake. The island makes a scenic view  
carried scoop by scoop in dug-out canoes for battles of retribution.

moss

moss remembers most about the mountain  
or the sound of morning  
so soft over rough ground  
so moist on moon-stone

moss is mindful of cloud-touch  
or footfall compresses  
slowly remoulds to  
spongy mossness

may I move like moss  
over humps and furrows  
stubborn over obstacles composing  
strong footholds knowing

modesty  
of measured growth  
soothing over mounds  
smoothing down hollows

## Kauri

You're leaving, but how to leave  
trees, for example? Each leaf  
an achievement. Growing up,  
as you do, from child to adult,  
a kauri, say, grows from tender seedling  
to spiky juvenile – difficult  
to raise at this latitude –  
takes a place in the family story,

the tender way your mother brought it in  
from frost then tucked you in,  
her thinning arms  
beside its thickening trunk,  
how its root bound pot rocked  
in the barrow the day she planted it out,  
her letters to you charting its rising height,  
ashes spread about its deepening roots.

Coming back to a tree  
with cones, a new shape,  
grown from conical to landscape,  
your own body more pear-shaped  
than hour glass, you stretch up your arms,  
fill your own space.

The kauri keeps growing. You wonder  
if it is in the wrong place, if one day  
someone will want its space  
for a driveway or herbaceous border, someone  
who sees heart wood and table top  
not a trunk measured in arm spans,  
a canopy in storeys.

## Nest

I found a starling's nest after the storm –  
last night I heard the awful wind and rain bash  
the iron roof and window panes –  
beside a broken branch under the enormous banksia.  
I thought it was a hank of damp hay  
until I picked it up. Each straw was laid  
flat as in a thatched roof. It meshed  
like knitting, a fishing trap, a woven kete.  
I turned it over and found a sly opening.  
Inside was smooth and completely dry  
and so soft my fingers seemed to float.  
I peered in: the hay dissolved to moss,  
olive and gold, wound round and round  
like thread and further in a bed of feathers,  
grey-blue and white like steam or smoke,  
vanes and down, the quills tucked in.  
I held it like treasure, a relic to preserve.  
In the tree, two starlings clutched  
in their beaks small straws  
of hay. I stared at the branches open  
to the sky, the hills silent and bare,  
the hay shed paddocks and paddocks away.  
I left the nest there.

## Flood

When the floodwaters rose up  
covering the plain with mirrors and veils

our backyards looked like other people's  
and the roads we drove failed under hills and rivers

that seemed to have been there longer than we had.  
Belongings stacked on pool tables sagged

and six sand bags might as well have been a cache of illegal toheroas  
for all the good they could muster

against the water spilling over the stopbanks  
faster and faster.

When the floodwaters rose up  
we sank down

into our steamed-up cars if we could find them  
or our fire-warmed lounges if we could reach them

watching the rain gauge, the tide times,  
the insurance claim, the surge line.

We wrote everything down in the record books  
but the numbers didn't look like much

because we'd stopped feeling  
that we were the ones who counted.

When the floodwaters rose up  
we sank back down to the bush

with weka  
and powelliphanta snails

and katipo  
clinging to waterlogged webs

and peketua, paddling,  
holding up their heads.



## Bumblebees

The sieve she scoops across the swimming pool  
sings like anger. Rucks of bumblebees

bunch the mesh, wings a-jitter, abdomens pulsing.  
She tips them on the grass. They die

or lift in ungrateful snoring flight.  
Every autumn, the lawn is punctuated

with wet apostrophes, black and gold.  
Inside the hive, the queen shuts in,

expels the drones, breeds new recruits,  
fat larvae spoon the throne with honeyed selves.

She reaches for them one by one, though each  
is part of something greater than the sum,

says to save them is her human due:  
the water is hydrangea blue.

## The Totara Calls Absence

All AWOL - huia, bush wren, mysterious starling, laughing owl (not laughing now).  
Strings of a's around the neck of the page. Garroted? No - burned, starved, made  
homeless, left to die. I? They cut off my arms and legs, carved them into planks.  
Drove wedges into my sides, climbed up to my head. Two days they took to saw it  
off, there were tears all round, my sap ran red. Dragged it to the river by bullock team,  
floated it on a barge to the mill. Came back for another slice off my stump.

Hollowed me out for a bunkhouse. Two of them inside me every night.  
Then one got a wife!

The fire couldn't touch my roots or my bark shell.  
Now they gather around with pen and film. I'm a wonder of their world.

## Koputaroa, near the Manawatu River

Last night, mid-winter, a morepork  
was in the naked silver birch, her ruru  
like a bassoon player camped outside our window  
tuning up; more a thickness  
than a sound, a bar  
of acoustic colour against the thin  
tv-speak in our lounge.

Dawn, the Tararuas gleamed purple  
before they transmogrified  
(there's a word to hold  
on the tongue like a boiled lolly,  
primary coloured, white central swirl,  
twisted in clear cellophane  
from Woolworths' pick 'n mix  
then McKenzies, then K-Mart  
now \$2 Dragon Market reeking  
of plastic, vinyl, cheap clutter)  
to turquoise, mauve  
when the mist rose.

For eight hundred years  
or more, Muaupoko  
saw underfeathers lifting.  
Koputaroa – breast of an albatross.

Down the front steps,  
my socked feet on the pebbled path,  
the Milky Way bright in the cold night.  
She sounded again and an answering call,  
a flute an octave or two higher,  
from the bottlebrush at the end of the drive.

No plant  
or animal on a New Zealand coastal plain  
subject to a swamp drainage scheme,  
other than the odd raupo  
or eel in a farm drain, is indigenous;  
nothing that meets the eye  
is yet a century old,

said Geoff Park with only a little hyperbole.

I shone my torch into the leafless  
branches and she stayed in my glare,  
thirty centimetres or more tall,  
motionless. My daughter, dressing  
for a party, unappreciative  
of my urging, poked her head  
around the open door  
then shut the chill outside.

Pukekos cross the road in pairs.  
Sometimes the survivor  
stands beside the dead mate  
in the path of another car.  
Swamp harriers patrol  
the bitumen. One or two  
tui come to our garden  
when the kowhai is in bloom.

Guiltily, because I knew the light was fierce,  
I shone the torch again.  
She was still there.

Before I went to bed, I went out again  
but she was gone, the tree strangely bare  
without her dark weight  
inside its slender limbs. Penetrating stars  
threatened frost. Suddenly cold,  
I hurried in, heard my daughter's hasty 'bye'  
as she slipped out, her car engine's rumble,  
discordant ipod beat  
pitching percussion at the brittle night.

## Turangawaewae

For months, he kept his wife's ashes beside the bed.  
In July, waking early before light or weak winter birdsong,  
the windows wet from night breathe, he put his hand  
on the glass, his hand print wept, went outside  
in warm pyjamas, gumboots, a black beanie.  
Each step crunched a dark print on frosted grass.  
Took the urn to the garden where leafy carrots still bent,  
spread the ashes in an outline like a crime scene, arms  
not splayed but tucked in, coming back  
filled in his own footprints as stepping stones.  
Ash, or grit, wedged in his boot tread, crunched  
on concrete steps, specks appeared beside the sink,  
under the dining table. He left them there. Tired  
of counting days, he laid his watch on the sill.  
A white band clasped his wrist, a round indentation,  
a watch without hands. The next day and the next,  
he walked between the house and the garden, each footfall  
falling in a footprint, each step forward stepping back.

## Weeds

Again, I lumber down the track  
on my blood red quad bike  
with my mustard yellow spray pack  
to kill weeds,

past the old seat  
where six years ago  
I spread my father's remains  
resembling not so much ashes  
as the fertiliser grains he spread each autumn.

Every summer, he marched  
down this track with his grubber  
to hew them out: Californian thistles  
also called cursed thistles, lettuce from hell.

Americans call them Canadian thistles.  
His mother called him Clemenceau  
in 1919 after the president of the First War  
Paris Peace Conference. Twenty-five years later,

he was an antitank gunner at Monte Cassino.  
My growing years: him tearing  
each night at the wars on tv.  
He thought it was done.

I spray these ruinous weeds, thinking of him,  
a soldier named for a peacemaker,  
for hope pushing through  
like rye and clover.

## The Shearer

arrives in a dented Datsun bucking across the paddock,  
ties the portable unit to the tallest post with electric  
blue baling twine, drops in the comb, manhandles  
the ewe against the crotch of her pants.

The wool is grey and stuck with docks  
but when she shears it falls away  
like taking off a robe. Underneath is cream,  
and, gilded in sun, looks gold.

Lanolin varnishes her skin, it shines  
as under lights, her silver hair glints.  
Graceful she moves, in her arms,  
pink and flushed, the slender ewe.

She pulls the cord, sets the sheep  
on its hooves, straightens her back, wipes sweat  
from her brow, beneath her arms, with a navy towel,  
pitches the gear in the car

like sacks of wheat, drives away  
across the ruts, the only remembrance  
of their fleeting dance: the golden fleece,  
froth of lace and tulle, bobbing on the back seat.

## Bush Reserve

A second-growth kahikatea remnant  
fenced from stock, the perimeter drained –  
boundaries simply breeched  
by convolvulus' smothering cloak.  
Walking is easygoing,  
seedlings and undergrowth trampled  
by pheasants and turkeys. Wind-blown trees  
admit poisonous light. When the westerly blows  
over exposed paddocks, trunks rock  
on roots bared by the dehydrated swamp.  
In summer, modest cream flowers are outdone  
by sunny ragwort, gorse, and purple crowds  
of Californian thistles. Red admiral,  
small white and common blue  
butterflies make airy swipes  
at hairy buds. The relaxed thistles  
accept the lyric landings,  
nod like parishioners  
or pioneers dividing by eye  
the forested land.



## The Huntaway

lays his head in my lap  
like a human child.

I rest my hand on loose pelt  
coated in hair soft  
as the head of a new-born,  
wrap my palm around muzzle  
that all morning scoured the ground  
for scent of rabbit, stroke wiry whiskers  
that mapped the contours of burrows,  
run my fingertips over teeth that today  
crunched the skulls of kits  
snatched from subterranean nests.

My hand in his mouth  
as in the steel jaws of a trap  
set for the lightest footfall  
rests like a host  
on the heat of his tongue.

I have taken him from his wild nest  
but his wildness gives in.

By instinct and pack lore  
he chooses the one who chose him,  
bows down, gives  
in exchange for my deviant touch  
his whole life,  
which I take  
as easily as the food  
from my plate  
to my mouth.

## Suddenly Rabbit

in seeded grass and thistledown summer heat,  
the huntaway bounding behind.

(Yesterday he crushed a frail skull,  
ate red flesh, ropey entrails.)

Tawn body, a silent, swift bundle,  
the black dog heavy and loud.

It seems time slows  
and by slowing

seems to lengthen as the chase extends surely beyond  
the endurance of either,

the paw pounding dog  
and the soft-footed rabbit

no bigger than a slipper,  
speckled as sparrows' eggs.

I think of its small ribcage,  
ribs thin as sewing needles,

leg bones no thicker  
than my finger bones,

heart a red bean.  
It sprints towards me,

all eyes and flattened ears,  
golden against the grass,

turns, runs at the dog, past  
and into the willows, disappears

into some lair or dark, twisting burrow  
where I imagine wild kits' ardent suckle.

## The Carrier

His eyes under a creased cotton cap  
don't give up much or give in, steeled  
to the clop of hooves, gentle ease  
of tonnages through yardings so narrow  
wooden rails billow against hides  
like sheets in a sea wind.

He gentles them with low murmurings,  
a father soothing a nightmared son:  
easy now, big boy.  
Drugged by his calm, their bodies still.  
In torpor they walk toward  
imagined fresh fields,  
his voice lulling them forward.  
He carries them to slaughter.

He's crossed acreages behind the wheel,  
cab a jar of amber heat, cargo bellowing  
in back, nights camped on laybys, musk  
of warm payload, like a reindeer herder  
roving with the herd. When they see him,  
they are not afraid. His ways resemble  
their own nature: a measured gait,  
sidelong glance, quietness – could be kindred.

Note: "We move with the herd" and "They know our voices and are not afraid," from "Reindeer Herders" by Anjali Yardi from the Montreal Poetry Prize 2015 short list.  
<http://montrealprize.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Reindeer-Herders.mp3>

## Wildebeest

You're watching Discovery Channel,  
cheering for the wildebeest  
as the lions close in (*Run faster!*),

for the bison circled by wolves,  
the seal washed off its ice raft  
by the pack of killer whales,

the penguin scrabbling from the lurching sea lion.  
Whales and wolves  
and even penguins have to eat, of course,

but you lobby for the underdog,  
(the rabbit chased by the dog)  
because vulnerability is achingly attractive.

You switch to a horror movie,  
the killer lurking in the shadows.  
(*Don't go outside!*)

Someone always does,  
though it's safer here, inside  
watching the small screen

than contemplating the big picture:  
oceans silted with plastic, the graph of ice melt  
going up like a rocket, carbon footprints everywhere.

The killer's out there – out there in the dark  
with your water bottles  
overflowing the recycling bin,

one car in the garage, the other  
in the driveway, air tickets to a warmer  
clime on the dash.

You reach for the wrong remote:  
the lion's claws sink into seal blubber,  
the wildebeest slides off the ice sheet

into the mouths of wolves  
lurking like zombies  
in the shadowy water.

## River

Unremitting,  
rushing, resting  
gathering, aerated, opaque,  
falling flat, a window pane to patchwork stony bed  
and sometimes a cockabully  
or air-kissed, ruffled,  
trodden by wind prints,  
continuous

despite algae in warm eddies,  
heap of shattered, burnt stones  
log-jammed with RTD empties,  
weeds: bolt of Scotch thistles beside the bank,  
waxy convolvulus climbing  
the broken macrocarpa branch,  
on a cattle track  
a sunny bouquet of ragwort.  
One black sock, a plastic bag  
snagged in rushes.  
Look, a used nappy under a stone.

## Kereru Primary

The children are learning  
to grow cabbages.

Their hearts swell.  
They are tall as great auks.

Sky says the incinerator  
looks like the gray whale

she saw on YouTube. Its innards  
wreath with worms.

Six raised rectangular beds  
bordered with untreated pine

grow tomatoes  
far from the road.

The green bin is for food scraps.  
Mrs Goodall's pig eats apple cores

crusts, muesli bars  
but not porcine growth hormone.

The wetland behind the marble patch  
used to be called the swamp.

Te Ara says it was a creek  
with eels once.

They plant seeds  
in the warm footprint of an igloo

made from plastic milk bottles supported by their own weight  
and, as a last resort, two tubes of Supaglu.

Storm says it reminds him of a big brain  
or a mushroom cloud.

You have to wait for them to grow and hope  
for good weather, says Hope.

## Sparrows

keep nesting, never knowing not to.  
Speckled eggs float to downpipes, drop,  
cold and whole on the lawn.  
Clearing guttering, my hand breaches a corpse.  
A fledgling falls like rain  
down the chimney, is trapped  
inside the metal flue above the firebox.  
Bouts of flapping sound in the lounge.  
In the chook house, another falls  
from the nest above the rafter.  
A hen snatches it, thrashes it on the ground,  
scuttles down the yard, the live chick  
dangling from her beak, three fowls in pursuit.  
It's spring. Everything is hungry.  
Each September equinox, naked young writhe  
on the driveway, plummet brokered  
by stomachs soft as mouths. Once, I severed  
heads with a spade to stop their suffering.  
Now, I pick them up by clammy feet  
(canary toes, fine black claws) throw them  
into the paddock as over enemy lines  
for hawks trolling above the old man pines.



## And Forth

The fortunate leave early.  
The rest with fortitude  
seep north,  
a sluggish stream of cars  
like algal bloom,  
a luminous log-jam  
drifting seaward.  
They come from hills and valleys  
around the harbour  
where oceans beckon  
through windows and screens.

When they drive  
they dream of not driving,  
when they return  
they dream  
of returning,

sandy footprints  
on old linoleum,  
a wet westerly  
whipping Kapiti,  
board games, bore water, bunks,  
kikuyu lawns,  
purple weatherboard,  
beached wood,  
smell of a dead fish,

waves forever  
back and forth.

## Always

The river always  
finds a way  
down from the ranges  
through the plain  
to the sea,

sometimes taking  
the circuitous route  
around corrals of cliffs,  
through macrocarpa roots,  
sometimes cross country,  
clear across old stones,

folding  
and bending back  
on its way forward,  
lengthening, stretching out long and wide  
as it takes its time,

looping back  
upon itself  
while weighing  
this way and  
that way

as it longs  
for the sea

and in longing  
reveals the length  
of its persistence

which is something to long for  
however slow and patient,  
however long

because the river  
always finds the sea  
by following  
a doubtless course

the way any life  
might double back,  
folding and looping,

but moves always  
eventually  
forward.

## Ducks

I heard a clack like wire slipping  
against a batten – a drake and a duck,  
she, tan and speckled as hay,  
he, brown as butcher's paper,  
around his neck a translucent band  
like copper gleaming –

slide across the pond smooth  
as bumper cars, become motionless  
as posts, as the windless gorse.

Because I know they're there  
I see her chestnut and fawn  
as feathers not shadow and light,  
his oval dark as duck  
not shade or log, his gold band  
as crest not sun-strike.

I wait for movement, stir, slip-up,  
splash. Nothing gives.

If I could wait as quiet, as calm  
for the dangerous world to pass,  
settle in instead of always pushing out.

I look away,  
and looking back  
the ducks are gone, not flown –  
I would have seen them lift –  
but settled further in, become  
the dappled pond, the bank,  
the rushes' thrown, mottled shadows.