

**EVENT TITLE:**

**Writing the Wounded World: Poets Working from and against Eco-Grief**

**EVENT DESCRIPTION:**

To be alive and aware today is to live in a wounded world. Let's discuss how we engage eco-grief, solastalgia, more-than-human beings, and how we write with awareness of our human identities, biases, and limitations. Humankind's complicity in the desecration of other living beings carries lamentation, anxiety and depression. We'll discuss approaches that acknowledge our grief, our attempts toward healing, and the communities we call home: Cape Cod to New Mexico to Washington State. The poets of this panel range across geographies, publishing histories, and identities. All have long demonstrated a care and concern for eco-poetics and a commitment to bringing race, class, sexuality, and other social identities into their eco-poetic work. We need to rage and we need to heal. These writers are operating in the cauldron of just that. We need paths forward. We need complicated voices. The writers of this panel—queer, Black, working class, and more—offer just that.

**EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft & Criticism**

**EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR/PARTICIPANT:**

**Todd Davis**, winner of the Midwest Book Award and the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize, is the author of seven books of poetry, including *Coffin Honey*, *Native Species*, and *Winterkill*. He is Professor of English and Environmental Studies at Penn State University's Altoona College.

**EVENT PARTICIPANTS:**

**Elizabeth Bradfield's** most recent book is *Toward Antarctica*. Her work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and her honors include the Audre Lorde Prize and a Stegner fellowship. Founder of Broadsided Press, she works as a naturalist/guide and teaches creative writing at Brandeis University.

**Geffrey Davis** is the author of *Night Angler*, winner of the James Laughlin Award, and *Revising the Storm*, winner of the A. Poulin Prize. He's received fellowships from Bread Loaf, Cave Canem, the NEA, and the Whiting Foundation. He teaches with the University of Arkansas and with the Rainier Writing Workshop.

**Donika Kelly** is the author of *The Renunciations*, winner of the Anisfield-Wolf book award in poetry, and *Bestiary*, the winner of the 2015 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, a Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Poetry, and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Kelly's poetry has been a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Publishing Triangle Awards, the Lambda Literary Awards, and longlisted for the National Book Award.

**Anne Haven McDonnell** is a poet and an associate professor of Creative Writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her books, *Living with Wolves* and *Breath on a Coal*, explore grief and wonder in relationship with earth.

## **OPENING REMARKS:**

For some of us, living in a world of climate change, of climate catastrophe, recognizing that one's very existence places a burden upon the living organism called earth, upon all living beings we share home ground with, means living with anxiety and stress, with grief and guilt. It means, for some of us, a need, a calling, an undeniable and urgent demand to testify, to witness, to call out to one another and to call back about the wounded world. But our use of the word "wound" also suggests for some of us the possibility of healing, of finding a way back toward a healthier relationship with the world, with the greater-than-human cosmos of other living creatures. As Robin Wall Kimmerer has written so beautifully and insightfully about the need for gratitude and reciprocity, the writers on the panel today certainly write poems that offer grief and gratitude, critique and possibility, a chance to enter into deeper relationship, one whose core value is reciprocity, asking what may we give back to a wounded world, and how might our poems help in the healing?

## **PARTICIPANT REMARKS:**

### **Elizabeth Bradfield:**

My plan is to read poems that feel truly, deeply connected to and drawn from my relationship to place/time and the other-than-human beings that I've had the privilege to study and live alongside. Such a connection both amplifies and minimizes the grief. It's both greater, because the losses are personal, not theoretical, and lesser, because there are still thriving and striving beings that continue and continue to amaze and awe.

The poems I read might play a bit with the idea of what "Eco-Grief" is. Personally, I hope to underscore and amplify poems that honor a mourning that centers either more-than-human beings or the costs of consumption.

I hope to also talk about *Cascadia Field Guide: Art, Ecology, Poetry* (Mountaineers, March 2023) edited by myself (Elizabeth Bradfield), CMarie Fuhrman, and Derek Sheffield. This book, like the *Sonoran Desert* and the *Southern Appalachian* literary field guides, blends art and science to celebrate this diverse yet interconnected region through natural and cultural histories, poetry, and illustrations. This project is a push against eco-grief and toward connection.

### **When One Known to You Dies, The Rearranging of Space and Time Begins** - *for Ladders, 2019 (Balaenoptera physalus)*

A rib (I know whose) in  
the harbor under  
waves. How

heavy would it be, hefted? Low  
tide will bare it,  
will allow

pickers to take it, make  
it décor—whale bone  
with tulips, leaching

minerals, oil, the perennials  
stronger for it. Up  
the beach

the rest of him. Un-  
scattered and held still  
by sinew, flesh.

Spine and ribs but no longer  
the jaw, which when he first  
washed up ashore

and was flayed by flensers and sun,  
proved to be broken.  
We knew him,

this fin whale, Ladders. I can't remember  
the year, the moment of  
my first

sighting or resighting of his stuttered  
prop scar, long healed, an easy  
marker. Who

was I then? Young and newly  
arrived, sorrows vast, and  
losses, it must

be said, negligible. Negligible.  
What does his rib curve  
now? That

space filled by water. That  
emptiness. And knowledge  
of what it once held.

—Elizabeth Bradfield

## Today, Alongside (a fresh-dead humpback whale)

Flitter over water over  
fat-slick, gobbets plucked,  
water pattered, dark souls  
of storm petrels, of sailors,  
restless and hungry and  
able to walk on water.

Up-slick,  
the body, now carcass, now source,  
belly up. Whale I watched  
a year ago as calf, as hope  
in that first, uncertain pandemic  
summer, nursing with his  
mother, nursing from  
his half-fluked mother  
(Venom) who had survived  
something else borne  
before I knew her.  
And now this:

Undersurface  
ripple then fin then shark  
a great white rides up  
the throat-slope—blubber  
wobbled, grabbed, torn. Water  
now blooded. Hunger met. Another  
shadow-glow circles, feeds. Another.  
We gawk.

Nodal point in all the gulf's  
waters at this moment, you gather  
us. We flock. The sea calms  
downtide from your flank, oiled  
smooth by what you slough.  
And, stink thick and coating,  
we take you in. We watch, we  
breathe, we are now part  
of your new, dissembled  
ongoing.

—Elizabeth Bradfield

### Off the Back Shore

For hours the draggers work  
the offshore bar so slow  
they leave no wake. The ocean  
is peaceful today. Blue water. Blue  
hull. Blue sky. Not quite August.  
Fuzzed plover chicks teeter  
dart and pause, dart and pause  
on thin, orange legs. I kind of know  
what's happening deep astern  
of those boats that track back and forth  
and sometimes cross each other  
like ponderous dancers. I kind of know  
the chain bag, the ticklers, the collateral  
damage done for the sweet muscle  
a creature with a hundred blue eyes  
uses to pull itself closed and safe.

—Elizabeth Bradfield

### Origin Story, Re-wrought

For decades, I was part of a machine I loved.  
It mothered me, raised me up from what sad self  
I was, bookish, theoretical, unbodied. By  
  
dog watch. By heaving line, by windlass  
and engine rounds, by *Roger that*  
I learned a life. She was conservative,

this mother. Her corporate  
particulars: *guest* not passenger, *stateroom*  
not cabin. No tattoos back then. No

piercings other than the two small lobe-holes girls  
were allowed. She pretended to not notice  
my nose ring, my raised eyebrow. I loved

the stories she told at night, in the darkened  
pilot house, as I watched with captain or mate  
for real dangers (we once ran aground) and the predicted

navigational winks telling us where we were (where?)  
and what to avoid. What to avoid? Whistling, bananas,  
women, queers. My first true love and I chuckled

then kissed in the gear locker, breast  
to breast. Look. I slept inside her (that mother).  
I slept inside her with my siblings: Frank and Nori

and Tom and Michael. Or, more exactly, we shared  
cabins, bunk by bunk, watch by watch. We slept  
together in the spell of what it was

to choose to sleep there. Innocent then of  
(marketing, marketing, carbon and trodding). And  
the older, cooler cousins (officers, engineers,

naturalists who'd done this for decades)—I studied them.  
Sometimes I, too, pulled up the long brass zipper  
of my boiler suit and got ready to grind metal or paint

a rail with toxic stuff that would endure a while in the tough  
air. Sometimes I, too, drove the Zodiac, stood  
with hand on tiller, left knee braced against the port

pontoon. Years later, youth purged, they welcomed  
me. Let me lecture on bears or whales or lichen. Sometimes  
I – ahh, fuck it. Listen. We were fooling ourselves,

even then. Even then, in those days, we knew  
there was rot and wrong in this. Or we should have.

—Elizabeth Bradfield

### **Geffrey Davis:**

I plan to explore how certain landscapes and more-than-human considerations—including the general meanwhile-ness of nature’s minor and major dramas—have served as speculative anchors or recovery guides during the writing of personal poems. Especially when making poems that return to emotionally intense experiences of loss or intellectually fraught contemplations of cultural events, attuning to eco-poetics has pushed me to acknowledge and explore and sometimes challenge the limited peripheries of human observation/reflection. Here are some poems that feel in concert with that working direction.

### **The Newaukum River**

I have been here before, smelled the same greenness and named it  
fishing, my other religion. I’ve seen the river bent and falling,  
trees bowed along the muddy banks, an early fog hovering

above the water’s current, like some gray ghost out over  
the going body. Here each cast is *prayer*, each slacked retrieval  
*prayer denied*. I have prayed this way since my father taught me,

since he showed me *prayer answered* in the brilliant scales of trout,  
salmon, steelhead. And now I return, trying to recreate  
the warm miracle—to pull the bulletlike answers from below.

—Geffrey Davis



## The Epistemology of Rosemary

—*for L*

Together in the garden, a cigarette cradled  
between her fingers, she tells me of breeding

cockatiels—clutch after successful clutch, and what  
she can't forget: the time of one-too-many and

the smallest chick pushed from the nest.  
How she thought *mistake* and put it back again,

only to see the same, simple denial.  
And then, for days, trying to make her hands

avian, to syringe-feed the bird into flight.  
One thin month lies between us and our miscarriage,

and I feel her grow silent under the new vastness  
of this wreckage. I try to talk about my father

breaking blighted pigeon eggs: at twelve, I thought  
*patience* and pressed him to wait, one week, then two,

until frustration set and he crushed the shells  
before me, against the coop. I wanted to gather up

each shard, to will those gossamer embryos  
into growth again— What do we rescue

now, at home, gleanings herbs in the evening,  
as swallows swerve in the fallow air? I lean over

her shoulder: her hair smells of the rosemary we take,  
and of the rosemary we leave to freeze in the garden.

—Geffrey Davis

## Survivor

My hands become two battered branches the first time  
I reach toward the not yet rankled tenderness of my son's  
backside, bound to the pre-gnaw of a soiled diaper.  
L lies in our living room, postpartum and pitched  
inside the warm depth of her own recovery, body busy  
with soothing the glory of its new stitching. How many  
darknesses can turn a desire? How many good breaths  
to cast one wound from the sky? I open as if breaking  
until a sudden and enthusiastic and sunshiny geyser of urine  
from my son's penis startles me into the inane proverb  
of a laughter you never see coming. My hands still shake  
as I cinch the boy back into the thin cleanliness  
of another waiting. And, yes, eventually I weep—:  
but only after, and only outside, kneeling in the garden,  
well beyond the indivisible light of his future. Amen.

—Geffrey Davis

## West Virginia Nocturne

One grief, all evening—: I've stumbled  
upon another animal merely being  
itself and still cuffing me to grace.

This time a bumblebee, black and staggered  
above some wet sidewalk litter. When I stop  
at what I think is dying

to deny loneliness one more triumph,  
I see instead a thing drunk  
with discovery—the bee entangled

with blossom after pale, rain-dropped blossom  
gathered beneath a dogwood. And suddenly

I receive the cold curves and severe angles  
from this morning's difficult dreams  
about faith:—certain as light, arriving; certain  
as light, dimming to another shadowed wait.  
How many strokes of undivided wonder  
will have me cross the next border  
my hands emptied of questions?

—Geffrey Davis

**Todd Davis:**

Ever since I was a child, working on my grandparents' farm with cows and hogs and mules, working at our family's animal hospital with all sorts of injured and sick pets, wandering the woods and streams of my homeplace to encounter the lives of deer and bear and fisher and bobcat, to see kingfisher and kestrel and owls and herons move through air, I wondered what stories, what poems, what songs, other-than-human animals might tell about their lives, about what they thought of us. As I grew and entered the world of adults, I became aware of the fact that many humans were deaf to these stories, were willingly ignorant, turning away from the desecration of forests and rivers and streams, of the lives that lived in these places. The more I've learned about the place I live in—through science, through story, through hours and days and years walking slowly and quietly in that place—the more I see the wounds, the more pronounced the desecration has become. My poems seek to testify to that desecration and those wounds, to imagine the stories of the living beings who cannot write a poem, and to never forget the possibilities of healing or the joy that still exists. My poems rage and howl at times, but I hope they also praise and offer thanks, too.

## Eclogue for an Extractive Economy

Each day I think this will be the last  
warbler. With the seasons confused  
these small birds stay longer and longer  
to starve. Wrapped in the long cord  
of its vine, I eat a fox grape to darken  
my mouth. An itinerant word flees,  
a bracelet of language fastened  
to the lone deer the neighbor shot  
and quartered. Like a white-footed mouse  
burrowing beneath snow, the stone in my sister's  
body opens to infection. The doctor diagnoses  
the shadow and buries it underground  
to hold the poison.

The geologist also seeks what's imprisoned. All around us pump jacks and the sounds of new wells being drilled. The derrickman ignores what happens when fossils are dislodged and scattered. Where the mountain was cut to the ground there's nothing to hold back the flood. The last year of his life my father struggled to breathe. I missed the hour of his death and woke to blood sopping the pillow. I pull on my boots before dawn. The elevator cage clanks as it descends the shaft. Without much light, it's impossible to see where the sea used to be.

—Todd Davis

# Foxfire

In the valley, where corn and beans grow in rows mapped by GPS, farmers feed cows and hogs tetracycline

and testosterone. After butchering them in dark tin buildings,  
they slop the remains to the survivors so the animals, shoulder-

to-shoulder, eat their own kind. At night, because of the lights  
the townspeople burn on their porches or hang from posts

to comfort themselves, only the brightest stars are woven  
into the black. The heat of summer lasts too long,

and the boy who lives on the mountain is raised from the sweat  
of his bed to look down on the town's spectral glow.

He can't hear the corn-leaves rustle when the breeze  
from the poisoned river swells, but he smells the paper mill

and thinks about swimming in what pours from its pipes,  
the carp he fishes for that turn on their sides.

Where a fire scorched the dirt the year he was born  
huckleberries grow on a talus slope near the peak.

To escape the heat, he climbs to the field in the dark and stands  
on the biggest rock, stretching arms like an egret.

Flight's a kind of forgiveness, and here fireflies blink  
mercifully among berry branches, miniature lamplighters

finishing their rounds for the night. They rise up and drift  
about his head, landing on arms and legs, gloving fingers

in a green luminescence. As if he were a rotting log in a swamp,  
laced with fungus that pulses like a star, he joins the milk-wash

of the infinite, a beacon for other heavenly bodies  
already falling in bright streaks to the earth.

—Todd Davis

## Pawpaw Elegy

Ointment for a troubled dream, feast to fill an ache, and so the bear  
crooks a small tree to the earth, arm bent like a shepherd's hook, feet  
treading branches, improvised hay rake to comb the oblong fruits

into tall grasses that grow along the oxbowed river. A boy will learn  
that a stream, as it ages, changes direction as it pleases, drowning those  
we love in spring floods. The fruit smashes, yellow custard squeezed

between leaves, a skin Ursus licks and teethes, wresting pleasure  
from the sunlight trapped within. The boy watches from beneath  
a cluster of witch hazel. His father, at dinner each night, said

*The feast is everywhere!* But since his death, the food on the plate  
congeals like a limp tongue, unable to taste anything but grief.  
Everything the bear eats builds along its rump, shaped into fat,

weaving a blanket of flesh before there's nothing left and winter  
drapes him in sleep. The pawpaw's bean-shaped seeds slide  
down the gullet, and the squeaky wheel of a goldfinch call

falls and begs joy from air. The boy's mother has asked him to pick  
the fruit for the pudding she'll curd, the loaf she'll bake, adding  
spiceberries and black walnuts to brighten the taste. The oven smells

like memory. In woods he's known since birth, he turns blankly  
and wonders where home is, stares at tree trunks and repeats  
their names as his father taught him. Still the shovel scrapes

sour mud from the coffin, and he weeps over the carelessness  
of water. On the river path the bear acts as farmer: seed-filled  
turds crushed and oozing with muck, newly planted orchard

to feed fox and woodchuck. In the boy's palm the darkened green  
of a pawpaw wobbles. His father would have cut a cross  
with his Barlow knife to test the color. He tears a patch

of the fruit's roughened skin, wiggles fingers in the breadbasket,  
bringing the doughy center to lips, a father's kiss, a groan  
of grieving delight.

—Todd Davis

## **In the Garden**

When the last pollinator fluttered its wings and folded  
into itself, like newspaper as it catches flame,  
we'd already buried the skeletons of the remaining  
hummingbirds, the husks of bees, what little was left  
of the antennae of moths and butterflies, the tiny corpses  
of the penultimate wasp and ant, the sting and bite  
of these small lives no longer a threat. Nothing had to be done  
for the scurrying beetles who burrowed into caskets  
of their own making, but some of us hung the now still  
bodies of swerving bats from lampposts, while others gathered  
them in nets, making pilgrimages to caves to lay them to rest.  
At a museum in Washington, D.C., small brass plates named  
each creature, explained their place in the vanishing taxonomy.  
Underground installations housed seeds for plants and trees,  
and we collected an example of each species  
that played a role in fertilization, pinned them to a board  
with elaborate charts that identified body parts  
and their peculiar uses. We were most interested in  
their mechanical efficiency and wished to recover  
the ways they conveyed pollen from anther to stigma.  
We brought in theologians who revised the sign of the cross,  
a version that emphasized reproductive organs  
and the importance of fecundity. Even the scientists believed  
resurrection, grown in a Petri dish, was our only chance:  
stigmata marking the wings of a swallowtail or monarch,  
each of us longing to touch the holes we'd help to make  
in the colorful fabric. This was our prayer to unburden us  
of doubt, and despite our lack of faith, we ached for a peach

at the end of a branch, a plum or apple, the honeyed pears  
we greedily ate in August, juice dribbling from our chins,  
fingers sticky with our own undoing. The few scientists  
who were not already living off-planet began to create  
new designs for our children's hands and lips,  
working to enhance the ridges in the brain that help  
to discern and process olfactory signals. They wrote code  
while the future slept in its fleshly rooms, reprogramming  
the cells for stunted growth, perfectly proportioned  
for the work that lay ahead. Where some might have seen  
deformity, we saw beauty: sons and daughters walking  
orchard rows, crawling between cornstalks and vineyard grapes,  
scaling almond trees whose cupped blossoms waited to be filled  
with our answers. The children stopped at each bloom,  
stooped with fingers shaped like paintbrushes, caressing  
silky petals as grains of pollen caught against their skin,  
enough static so this precious dusting wouldn't fall away,  
until they delivered it to a flower of our choosing.

—Todd Davis

## **Sitting Shiva**

If you find the bones of a bear, sit down and stay with them.  
The dead desire our company. Touch each one—scapula,  
tibia, ulna—even the tiniest bones of the hind and forefeet,  
the curve of every claw. Just out of sight, a thrush will sing.  
Bird song is a way to speak in secret. Find comfort  
in the arbutus that whitens each March on the old logging road.  
Wait until dark. A full moon will rise from the bear's skull,  
showing what she thought of us. Hold the moon-skull in your lap,

stroke the cranial ridges. You may see your dead father  
scaling the talus to the blueberry field where this bear ate,  
mouth sated and purpled by the sweetest fruit. Your mother



will be in the room on the second floor of the house, packing  
and then unpacking a box of your father's clothes. It's hard  
to give up this life. But we must. Others are waiting behind us.

—Todd Davis

**Donika Kelly:**

I plan to discuss the notion of alongsideness, including my own journey away from  
hierarchy and dominion and toward a different kind of scale. The notion of being  
alongside other animals, other beings, keeps me in scale (small). This re-scaling  
allows me to access wonder at the logics and illogics of the natural world as well  
as a depth of grief at how the animal we are, under capitalism, white supremacy,  
and evangelical Christianity, seems bent on a practice of ruin.

**WHEN THE FACT OF YOUR GAZE MEANS NOTHING,  
THEN YOU ARE TRULY ALONGSIDE**

late spring wind sounds an ocean  
through new leaves. later the same  
wind sounds a tide. later still the dry

sound of applause: leaves chapped  
falling, an ending. this is a process.  
the ocean leaping out of ocean

should be enough. the wind  
pushing the water out of itself;  
the water catching the light

should be enough. I think this

on the deck of one boat  
then another. I think this

in the Salish, thought it in Stellwagen  
in the Pacific. the water leaping  
looks animal, looks open mouthed,

looks toothed and rolling;  
the ocean an animal full  
of other animals.

what I am looking for doesn't matter.  
that I am looking doesn't matter.  
I exert no meaning.

a juvenile bald eagle eats  
a harbor seal's placenta.  
its head still brown.

this is a process. the land  
jutting out, seals hauled out,  
the white-headed eagles lurking

ready to take their turn at what's left.  
the lone sea otter on its back,  
toes flopped forward and curled;

Friday Harbor: the phone booth  
the ghost snare of a gray whale's call;  
an orca's tooth in an orca's skull

mounted inside the glass box.  
remains. this is a process.  
three river otters, two adults, a pup,

roll like logs parallel to the shore.  
two doe, three fawns. a young buck  
stares, its antlers new, limned gold

in sunset. then the wind again:

a wave through leaves green  
with deep summer, the walnut's

green husk. we are alive in a green  
crashing world. soon winter.  
the boat forgotten. the oceans,

their leaping animal light, off screen.  
past. future. this is a process. the eagles  
at the river's edge cluster

in the bare tree. they steal fish  
from ducks. they eat the hunter's  
discards: offal and lead. the juveniles

practice fighting, their feet tangle  
midair before loosing. this  
is a process. where they came from.

for how long will they stay.  
that I am looking doesn't matter.  
I will impose no meaning.

—Donika Kelly

**WE CAME HERE TO GET AWAY FROM YOU**  
*Port Townsend, Washington*

Downhill, a skeleton of an orca  
suspended: a female beached; belly full,

at that time, of seal and fish; the seal and fish  
full, at that time of poison. The volunteer,  
white bob, soft face, knew too the desire

to see a body—its echoes—suspended.  
Hope, the name given to a dead whale once

located by clicks and whistles in echo  
in inlet in open sea. The volunteer  
tells me she visited the Smithsonian

Museum of African American  
History— says, *The saddest part, to me,*

*the Emmett Till—do you know him?— exhibit.*  
The whale, killer, weakened by a scaffold  
of old poison: DDT, PCBs,

which no prey can process but holds in its fat  
its tissues its soft parts. See her Southern

scaffold: Mississippi, Alabama,  
Georgia. See, I hadn't thought to think  
of him here, under the reconstructed

skeleton I had come to see, and once  
seen, to mourn. She wanted to stand over

his bones, his grave on her bucket list.  
She pushed into me her desire,  
the sound surfacing what had, long ago,

leached into my softest parts. I wanted  
to hold her shoulders, vomit into her mouth

this water full of dead or dying,  
to fill her with a little knowing,  
change her, heavy her, let the knowing wash

her into the Salish at low tide, past driftwood  
and eel grass, hope a warning at her back.

—Donika Kelly

## BLOOD PRICE

I've done my best not to think  
of horseshoe crabs  
their blue blood  
their decade spent unsurveilled  
the three hundred million years  
they have passed subject  
to the comet's  
                    the shark's  
    the gull's  
                    descending eye

Without thinking I mirror  
how little they must think of us  
How unimaginable we must be

Our unimaginable industry  
gathering the material meant  
to recover what ought  
to have remained buried  
while the beach transgresses  
into the marsh and the marsh  
transgresses into the interior  
The beach  
                    a memory  
the peat and hard structures  
revealed after storm and surge  
all that remains

Our industry is approximate  
the sand to our eye fine  
the sand to the horseshoe crabs' legs  
too fine to dig a hole to set the egg cluster  
that feeds the terrapin and red knot  
and ruddy turnstone

I want to think of the crab now  
a boon but distant companion  
but we devastate with our virtue

late and meager

I have laid no sand  
                    and still I say *we*  
because how dare I distinguish  
one animal from the other

—Donika Kelly

**Anne Haven McDonnell:**

I often feel that our rational, human time-scale brains are not built to take in the scale of loss of this moment of the climate crisis and ecological unraveling. I wonder how poems can swerve in sideways, can take leaps of time and tone, can juxtapose elevated speech with the intimate ordinary, can invite other ways of knowing and experiencing through incantation, image, and music to meet this moment. I wonder how poems can invoke and enact the worlds of more-than-human beings, and how poems can help us glimpse our own animal bodies as nested with other bodies of the living world. I wonder how grappling with death of intimate beloveds can connect us to the larger losses of this moment. I'm interested in the deeply connected nature of grief and wonder in life and in poems.

Here are a few of my poems where I'm approaching the grief and wonder of this precarious moment.



## Slow

I like to go out at night, let the stars remind  
me of what I can't get near. Clocks of fire.  
I could list the zeros, trail them off  
the page. I don't think that gets us closer.

When I despair for the burning world,  
my friend zooms out toward a time  
without us, vast and quiet. Cells  
dividing, lichen eating stone,

something crawling out of the sea.  
I'll admit a kind of comfort there.  
But I'm working on staying. When we floated  
down the Grand Canyon, our guide

drew maps of time with a stick in the sand—  
shallow, warm oceans and animals  
with shells pressed to stone. He slid a piece  
of paper under a rock, wrinkling it

to show where continents collided.  
As we paddled our rafts toward  
the smooth tongue of current, the deep  
pull of the river's want of sea, rock rose

above us, swallows carving loops and arcs  
over layers of deepening limestone,  
sandstone, shale, schist. There are places

on earth that only rivers know.  
There are kinds of knowing too slow  
for breath. Last night I went out in the rain,  
kneeled to watch a black slug slowly

sheathe along its trail of slime. It poked  
the air toward me with its eyes of boneless horns.  
Its skin glistened like something just born. It left  
a trail of mucus, starlit on the black road.

—Anne Haven McDonnell

## Once There Were Fish

Once, the rivers moved both ways, up  
    through the one mind of salmon, silvered  
into many bodies, sweeping across  
    the land like weather. I stood  
knee-deep in the last of it, Alaska  
    the year the tundra burned,  
the year the old ones fell through  
    the ice that always held. I saw  
an old buck, hook-jawed and mottled,  
    sloughing off skin, nosing his weary  
way past my shin. Then I saw the river  
    turn back its silted face, mumbling  
to its darling gravel along the shore.

    The gulls lifted and flung  
their white flags, their shrieks tearing  
    holes in the rain. I tell you  
I saw it as it once was here  
    and everywhere—the ground  
thundering thousands of hooves,  
    wings darkening out  
the sky, numberless animals  
    spreading and gathering like storms.  
How salmon carried the sea's longing  
    to return. I stood knee-deep  
in my own longing, casting  
    along the edge of current and slack,  
dragging orange yarn tied on a hook  
    across their path. And when  
the sockeye struck, the yank  
    pulled both the oldest  
and youngest parts of me. And when  
    I pressed my palm on the flank,  
that golden eye—cold  
    and steady as it stared  
where? Shelves of ice sloughing  
    into sea, rivers running straight  
down the moulins. The rushing

world, the melt. The fire.  
The fish shuddering still  
under my hand.

—Anne Haven McDonnell

## She Told Me the Earth Loves Us

She said it softly, without a need  
for conviction or romance.  
*After everything?* I asked, ashamed.

That's not the kind of love she meant.  
She walked through a field of grey  
beetle-bored pine, snags branching

like polished bone. I forget sometimes  
how trees look at me with the generosity  
of water. I forget all the other

breath I'm breathing in.  
Today I learned that trees can't sleep  
with our lights on. That they knit

a forest in their language, their feelings.  
This is not a metaphor.  
Like seeing a face across a crowd,

we are learning all the old things,  
newly shined and numbered.  
I'm always looking

for a place to lie down  
and cry. Green, mossed, shaded.  
Or rock-quiet, empty. Somewhere

to hush and start over.  
I put on my antlers in the sun.  
I walk through the dark gates of the trees.

Grief waters my footsteps, leaving  
a trail that glistens.

—Anne Haven McDonnell

## **In the Time of Snow**

And then the ice receded  
    and left the tundra scoured—  
speckled granite and fluted waves  
    of snow, wind-carved  
and curved into forms that only  
    appeared still—and then the birds  
who learned to live there  
    where wind always blows  
the cornices, the drifts, the cornsnow  
    crystals spraying like stars  
until willow buds were unburied  
    and thus could be  
eaten in the coldest time of sleep.  
    And so, fat under their feathers,  
they learned to hide and turn  
    white as milk to match  
their scooped nests of snow,  
    and as the snow melted,  
their feathers learned to take  
    on the color of lichen-speckled stone.  
And all this was before Joyce was there  
    to see them, her shoulders hunched  
towards tundra, her flickering blue eyes  
    under the green hood of her parka  
following their tracks and scat scattered  
    on the wind-blown patches of willow.  
And this was before Joyce skied  
    ahead of us, my mother  
and I skiing inside her tracks  
    as she trudged past the protection  
of spruce and limber pine out into  
    the open treeless high  
place where wind is god  
    and we turned into it, ducking  
against the cold and into our own  
    deep fires. And this was before  
all three of us lay down  
    our ski poles, unlatched

our bindings, dropped our packs  
and sat to watch three  
ptarmigan huddle as snow inside  
snow, their black eyes  
like seeds on the surface.  
And this was before  
my mother and I skied to that  
same meadow but stopped  
in the lee of trees and my mother  
opened the jar from her pack  
and spoke directly to Joyce,  
said her prayer and I closed  
my eyes, and the birds blinked  
their black eyes  
and the ash left a dusting of stone  
across the snow.

—Anne Haven McDonnell

## Owl

In winter, we find her invisible  
against the furrows  
of cottonwood bark. Her swivel  
and lean follow us until  
we sit on the old polished log  
we call creature. She blinks,  
swells her feathers out, shakes and settles.

It's a good day when I see an owl.  
We watch until she drops— a fall  
opening to swoop and glide. What is it  
with lesbians and owls? Someone  
asked. I'll leave the question  
there. There's a world

the old trees make of water  
and air. I like to feel the day  
undress its cool oblivion, currents  
moving the one mind of leaves,  
shadows deeper with the breath  
of owls. Just the chance she might  
be there watching makes me  
love— no— makes me loved.

—Anne Haven McDonnell