NATURE POETRY

John Breukelman

that spring should vanish with the rose!

2
Sumer is icumen in

3
What flowers are these?

4
The common sun, the air, the skies

5
The swan on still St. Mary's Lake

6
From Greenland's icy mountains

7
thou deep and dark blue ocean

8
The Owl and the Pussy-Cat

9
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing

10
like moonbeams on a river

11
purple mountain majesties

12
the wild geese sailing high

13
Wild flowers on the hills

14
beasts with kingly eyes

15
Trail with daisies and barley

Vol. 20
No. 2

The Kansas School Naturalist
Kansas State Teachers College
Emporia, Kansas

December 1973
"To him who in the love of Nature holds Communion with her visible forms, she speaks A various language..."

So wrote the youthful William Cullen Bryant in 1821; indeed, nature does speak a various language. Those who love nature return the compliment, writing and speaking about her in various forms, such as prose, poetry, and as Judith Jacobs has said, "prose-related writings with overtones of verse." Much of the world's poetry is nature-oriented. As is hinted by the quotations on the front cover of this number of The Kansas School Naturalist, this has been true from the early days of English writing.

Some nature poetry is entirely or mainly descriptive, as for example, THE SEASONS, by James Thomson (1700-1748):

"The daisy, primrose, violet darkly blue,
And polyanthus of unnumbered dyes..."

More often, nature poetry makes use of figurative language, allusion, symbolism, and indirection, in order to set the stage for the expression of experience that goes beyond mere description. Thus MEETING AT NIGHT, by Robert Browning (1812-1889), begins with:

"The gray sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low..."

as though it might be only a description of a marine landscape. But it closes with these lines:

"And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears, Than the two hearts beating, each to each."
So the first lines are not merely descriptive, but also the introduction to a trip, by rowboat and on foot, that leads to the meeting of sweethearts. Most nature poetry, by the use of words descriptive of plants, animals, oceans, mountains, deserts, woods, and all the other endlessly varied features of our surroundings, really deals with love, patriotism, religion, and what-not, expressed in such a way as to appeal to the emotions.

I am presenting here some representative samples of nature poetry, from the classics to the present, and written by both children and adults.

I really have no “favorite” but if I had to pick one just for the record it would probably be this untitled one (No. 1052) by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), reprinted here exactly as she wrote it, and as it appears in the Johnson Edition. Miss Dickinson, well known for her short meaning-packed poems, lived most of her life as a near recluse in Amherst, Massachusetts. Only three or four of her nearly 1800 poems were published during her lifetime.

I never saw a Moor—
I never saw the Sea—
Yet know I how the Heather looks
And what a Billow be.

I never spoke with God
Nor visited in Heaven—
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the Checks were given—

To me the exquisite little jewel of nature poetry is FOG, by Carl Sandburg (1878-1971), Illinois poet who wrote eight books of poetry, received a Pulitzer Prize for his historical work on Lincoln, and was characterized by Untermyer as a “guitar-playing anachronism, an ancient Viking who speaks and sings with a mid-western drawl.”

I have particularly enjoyed STARS.

FOG

The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

STARS

Alone in the night
On a dark hill
With pines around me
   Spicy and still
And a heaven full of stars
   Over my head,
White and topaz
   And misty red;
Myriads with beating
   Hearts of fire
That aeons
   Cannot vex or tire;
Up the dome of heaven
   Like a great hill,
I watch them marching
   Stately and still
And know that I
   Am honored to be
Witness
   Of so much majesty.


Reprinted by permission from COLLECTED POEMS of Sara Teasdale. Copyright 1920 by The Macmillan Company; renewed 1948 by Marie T. Wireless.
Judith Alymere Jacobs, who retired from KSTC in 1964, taught Education in the college and English and drama in Roosevelt High School; she now lives on the family farm (Solbakken) near Hudson, Wisconsin. Here are five examples from her almost 800 "prose-related writings with overtones of verse" that have been published.

NATURE SINGS
April is a song
Stirring in the harp-like branch
Of a cherry tree.

CLOUDS THAT WARM
Dark clouds,
project your gloom;
for if you hover low,
frost may not nip our late asters tonight.


Richard Dorer, who wrote THE FOREST MONARCH, is the retired chief of Minnesota's Bureau of Game. He helped to establish the first soil conservation districts in his state and was the father of the "Save Minnesota Wetlands" program under which some 250,000 acres are being set aside for wildlife habitat.

THE FOREST MONARCH
The wilderness was gorgeously arrayed
In Autumn's radiant robes of every shade
And I stood in its midst, a towering tree,
Fashioned to fullness by the Deity
Who clothed me in a most alluring gown
And raised my spire above the forest's crown.

Reprinted by permission from THE GHOST TREE SPEAKS by Richard J. Dorer; copyright 1964. Rinehart and Company. The accompanying drawing is by Walter J. Breckenridge, retired director of the University of Minnesota Museum of Natural History, who is well known throughout Kansas School Naturalist territories for his Audubon Screen Tours.
Kenneth Porter, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Oregon, was born near Sterling, Kansas, and was on the faculty of Southwestern College, Winfield, from 1936 to 1938. The following view of the coyote is from his book, The High Plains.

COYOTE

We check our ponies. "Look" says he
"A coyote!" "Where?" my strained eyes ask
vainly. And then the feral mask
slit eyes and lolling tongue, I see

of that lean prairie-wolf, the one
fit genius of the desert-land,
with pelt as yellow as the sand
and eyes as golden as the sun.

And still across the barren plain,
the dust and dazzle of the years,
his pointed muzzle and prick-ears
are etched fang-sharp upon my brain.

With brush held low, a swift gray-brown
wind-shadow in the faded grass,
he vanishes—none sees him pass—
on feet of steel and thistle-down.

Verne N. Rockcastle, who gave us this
view of the chipmunk, is a Professor of Science
Education at Cornell University. He was for
several years the editor of the Cornell Science
Leaflet, which was the pattern for The Kansas
School Naturalist.

CHIPMUNK

Furry, striped friend with mumps
Who catches berries under stumps,
How do you fare beneath the snow
When wintry blasts begin to blow?
I watched your summer's scurried reaping
Of seeds and nuts and, for your sleeping,
Mouthfuls of leafy bits and bark
To keep you snug in frigid dark.
They say you doze till winter's past,
That though you hoard enough to last
For several seasons underground,
There's plenty left when spring rolls 'round.
Why, then, insist on frenzied forage
When half as much is ample storage?

1964, by permission of the author, who also supplied the
accompanying photograph.
Gary Snyder, who lives in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California, tries to speak for the non-human realms in his poems. He held Bollingen and Guggenheim Fellowships and has received several poetry awards. WITHOUT is from his recent book MANZANITA.

WITHOUT

the silence
of nature
within.

the power within.
the power
without.

The path is whatever passes—no
end in itself.

the end is,
grace—ease—
healing,
not saving.

singing.
the proof
the proof of the power within.

From MANZANITA by Gary Snyder; reprinted with the permission of Gary Snyder, copyright 1972.

HAIKU

I became fascinated with haiku (both singular and plural) when I first encountered them in a college English course. In its strict arrangement this Japanese verse form consists of three lines, of seventeen syllables arranged 5-7-5. The haiku I turned in for my class assignment was:

Japanese haiku—
five syllables, then seven,
and then five again.

One of the best known of Japanese haiku was written in 1686 by the famous poet Basho (1644-1694), who is thought to have started writing at the age of nine. Translated literally, this haiku goes:

Old pond;
frog jump in,
water-sound.

In English, this does not meet the 5-7-5 requirement, but in Japanese it does:

Furu-ike-ya
kawazu tobi-komu
mizu-no-oto.

From the book AN INTRODUCTION TO HAIKU by Harold G. Henderson; copyright 1958; reprinted with the permission of Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Two of my favorite haiku are the opener, by Buson (1715-1783), and the closing one, by Sora (1648-1710), in Cherry Blossoms, which is Series III of a four-part set.

NEW YEAR’S EVE

I can snore in peace . . .
the New Year won’t confront me
till tomorrow noon.

DEATH SONG

On the last long road
when I fall and fail to rise.
I’ll bed with flowers.

Reprinted from CHERRY BLOSSOMS, JAPANESE HAIKU: SERIES III, translated by Peter Behrens; copyright 1960 by The Peter Pauper Press.

Because of the shortness, haiku must depend on suggestion and allusion; they cannot give detailed descriptions. This very limitation, however, makes a haiku an interesting way to express a quick impression, a snapshot as it were, of a natural feature. I have had a lot of fun doing haiku, a few samples of which follow.
CYPRESS
Why should the cypress standing forever in place have, of all things, knees?

BEAVER
The eager beaver who carved this aspen sculpture followed nature's plan.

ROOTS
Mythical creature? No—the once essential roots of a fallen spruce.

RACCOON
Equally at home in the woods, or in the towns raiding garbage cans.

ICE
A Kansas ice storm comes with a gift of beauty—also destruction.

TOGETHER
Neptune and driftwood, how came you thus together on the Georgia beach?

DAFFODIL
Unrequited love, nemesis for Narcissus, bright orange, yellow.
CHILDREN AND POETRY

Children seem to have natural affinity for poetry. They not only like the rhythms of the Mother Goose Rhymes and other "children's poems" but many, if not most, of them like to make up verses themselves. I was one of these; the oldest "poem" I still have in my possession was written in 1911, when I was at the ripe age of ten. It goes like this:

Snowflakes look like stars,
Some flowers look like moons,
The wind sounds like a coyote,
And the rain makes drumming tunes.

I must have had help from an understanding teacher, because in the Dakota plains where I grew up snow was something you used to make snow men, or to build snow forts for snowball battles, or something you had to shovel out of the way—not to be compared with stars. My next one was a year later; by then I had adopted the "Little Bo-Peep" format:

SHEP

My old dog Shep
Has lost his pep
And doesn't know where to find it.
He likes to lay
Around all day
And doesn't seem to mind it.

My daughter, Mrs. Claire Schelske of Ann Arbor, Michigan, when she was a pupil in the third grade at the laboratory school on the KSTC campus, wrote several, of which my favorite is one about kittens:

Have you ever played with kittens
With soft and furry mittens?
When you pet them to sleep
Their mittens turn to paws.
But when you play too rough with them
They turn to long sharp claws.

My daughter, Mrs. Robert Yoder of Peabody, Kansas, when she was teaching a group of educable retarded children at Hillsboror, Kansas, used poetry writing as an interest developer. On one occasion when she suggested the format: 1. the subject; 2. a two-word line describing the subject; 3. a three-word line telling what the subject does; 4. a four-word line telling how the subject makes the writer feel, one of the 12-year old girls wrote this about boys.

Boys
Rough tough
They make noise
Bad sad mad glad
Boys.

The most interesting thing about children and poetry I have seen recently was an article entitled "Child as Poet and Parent as Child" by James F. Mersmann, on the editorial page of the Kansas City Star, February 4, 1973. The following is reprinted from the article, by permission of Dr. Mersmann, Professor of English, Benedictine College, Atchison, Kansas.

"For me one of the best kinds of sharing and 'making' with my children is the making of poetry . . . Sometimes road trips that might otherwise have been filled with quarrels or brain-rattling car games, have been relieved for a few moments by our attention to the possible poetry along the road. 'What do these silos look like?' Maybe the first answer is 'huge bullets' but if you are a gentle parent you probably don't encourage that; you suggest that perhaps a more imaginative image can be found. Finally some one finds it:
Silver-topped silo;
some giant forgot
his thermos bottle.

Other poems we have made along the road:

The water tower
stands by the road;
a silver spider.

Bright sunlight on broken cars;
the junkyard is full of stars.

The plane is a bumble bee;
the city opens like a flower.

But the road poem I like best of all came
one black evening:

The dark runs away
down the road in the night;
dark, why are you
afraid of the light?

(Answer me that, oh ye metaphysicians?)”

In the article Dr. Mersmann referred to
such poems as “irregular haiku.” Here are
three more examples:

The little dog is
dirty. I pet him anyway
his eyes are very clean.

The porcupine's quills
stick out all over, maybe
he never gets hugged.

I thought mud puddles
were ugly; then I caught one
pretending to be the sky.

Concerning the educational uses of poetry,
Verne Rockcastle commented as follows in the
March 1964 number of Cornell Science Leaflet:
“if, along with the reading of poems such as
included in this Leaflet, the teacher will
encourage close and accurate observation of
the living things about which the poems are
written, then the poems will give a full
measure of their intended value—enjoyment of
good verse, and a closer look at the natural
environment. As children are led to look, they
are led to wonder; as they wonder, they can be
led to think and experiment; as they
experiment, they will learn. From learning
from nature, they will grow in understanding
and appreciation.

Natural science today can be presented to
youngsters in dejuiced, objective form that
asks only answers to questions, or it can be
presented in a form that combines the spirit of
the poet with the analytical curiosity of the
scientist and makes learning a joy. So these
poems are presented to you—for enjoyment
and learning.”

AMERICAN INDIAN POETRY
American Indian poetry is inseparably
blended with song, dance, and other activities,
even with prayer. In fact, many of the dances
are prayers. Because there was no written
language, other than some ideographic
memoranda, the poems (songs, prayers) were
passed on by word of mouth, reinforced by
melody and dance. Since Indians live close to
nature, much of their poetry is of course
nature-oriented, both in its origin and
development. Two examples follow: one a
description of the house in natural terms, the
other a traditional prayer to the Great Spirit
who is in and of all nature.

MY HOUSE

My house is made of logs.
Once these logs were trees growing.
They were trees standing tall.
Now they make the walls of my house.
Hilltop and sun and wind,
grass and stars and trees,
I need you for my house.
AN INDIAN PRAYER

O GREAT SPIRIT,
Whose voice I hear in the winds,
And whose breath gives life to all the world,
I need your strength and wisdom.

LET ME WALK IN BEAUTY,
and make my eyes ever behold
the red and purple sunset.

MAKE MY HANDS RESPECT
the things you have made
and my ears sharp to hear your voice.

MAKE ME WISE
so that I may understand
the things you have taught my people.

LET ME LEARN THE LESSONS
you have hidden in every leaf and rock.

I SEEK STRENGTH,
not to be greater than my brother,
but to fight my greatest enemy—myself.

MAKE ME ALWAYS READY
to come to you with
clean hands and straight eyes.

SO WHEN LIFE FADES,
as the fading sunset,
my spirit may come to you
without shame.

A traditional Sioux prayer provided by Red Cloud Indian School
Holy Family Mission, Father Ted Zuercher, Director, Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

THOSE LONG STONE FENCES

A lovely Sunday drive;
Restful it should have been
But that my mind would not
Forget those tired men
Who placed flat stone on stone
To make a measured pile
So high, so wide, so long,
Mile after weary mile;
So I arrived at home
With aching back and arms—
Just seeing those stone fences
Surrounding Flint Hills farms.

DESERT

All the way to the far horizon
extends the solid shifting sea
on which we stand.

A soft wind
blows the hard sharp sand
in rippling wavelets
erasing our footprints
as though we had been
wading
in warm and lazy
grainy water.

BEAUTY

Anyone with open eyes
may "look on Beauty bare,"
also in rose and butterfly,
sunshine, rain, and air.
To him whose quest is beauty,
beauty is everywhere.
THE OCEAN

If I had never seen
The swell of the ocean
With its rolling surf,
I would still know
What it looks like
For I have stood at sunset
Facing an evening breeze
Viewing the distant horizon
Across a green-gold field
Of Kansas wheat.

FOSSILS

Nature's hieroglyphic record
has never been completed;
some of the pages have been lost
and sentences deleted,
many words too dim or blurred
for reading with finality;
but Nature wrote the record with
complete impartiality.

PLAINS OF KANSAS

"Kansas is a level plain"
In the geography book,
But not where you stop the car
To get out and look.

Not at Coronado Heights
Or where the Flint Hills are,
Not at Tonganoxie Lake
Or Fegan or Lone Star,
And not the bluffs of Atchison
The breaks of the Saline,
The chalk cliffs of the dinosaurs
Or the Barber County scene,
And not along the Skyline Road
Or Smoky Hill terrain—
But in the book Kansas is
A flat and level plain.

LENGTH vs STRENGTH

The big abductor muscle
of the clam is stronger
but the starfish hangs on longer
And always wins the tussle;
stubbornness of greater length
prevails against mere muscle strength.

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

Charles Darwin

In the competition
among things alive
most of the time
the fittest survive
and this survival
in nature means
that the fittest send on
their fitness genes
to make their offspring
ever more fit
and so on and on—
well, that's about it.
A FURROW MAY REMAIN

A furrow in the soil
cuts living roots, not so
the tracks of rabbits
in the snow.

Before the wind and sun
a snow-track disappears;
a furrow may remain
for years.

THE LITTLE ROAD

The little road is hidden now
sealed by frozen snows
but here, a thousand miles away,
I know just where it goes.

Though it's but a narrow road
it is not hard to see
either through the eyes of dreams
or those of revery.

WINGS

With sudden darting motion
an oriole goes by;
a falcon slowly circles
into the azure sky;
whirling wings of maple seeds
transport them through the air,
and our imaginations' wings
can take us anywhere.

TOMATO

Do you say toe-may-toe
to rhyme with potato,
or maybe toe-mah-toe
as in pizzicato,
or perhaps tuh-may-ta
to go with pro rata?
It will taste the same
by whichever name.

NEVER BEFORE

The sky had never been so blue,
ever the clouds so white,
the irises so purple,
everything so right—
the roses never were so red,
ever the grass so green
until you stood beside me
to share with me the scene.

TO A HOUSE SPARROW

You little pest,
why don't you lay off
the eaves trough
when you build your nest
this season? . . . for
if you don't clog the pipe
I won't have to gripe
about sparrows any more.
BIRDS OF A FEATHER

"Birds of a feather flock together." Who said that? A man, mindful of his companions?

They're a cosmopolitan lot, these close companions of his—

Wherever he goes they go; in his home they dwell; they travel in his ships and trains; they sleep in his bedrooms; they help him eat his daily bread—

The house cricket and silverfish, the cockroach and the moth, the rat and the timorous mouse, the persistent fly in the house.

CHRISTMAS TREES

The cedars in the back yard this snowy day as though it was Christmas need no tinfoil icicles or other baubles because they are self-decorated.

ENERGY CRISIS

How many foot-pounds go to waste as the Kansas winds go by in haste?

How many windmills could they turn? How much emergy could we earn, and without fuel to dig and burn?

As the winds go by from sea to sea they bring us energy all for free with no pollution and no debris.

Will windmills one day dot the plains meeting energy crisis with energy gains?

WHY NOT?

Said ma skunk to her kiddies "let us spray."

Said the pious papa tiger "let us prey."

We use 2-4-D as a wild lettuce spray.

COPY CAT

An echo does promptly what it sets out to do; an echo is accurate but adds nothing new.

ONLY ONE EARTH

What further resources can we use? How many species can we banish? How many errors can we make? What habitats permit to vanish? What more can we afford to lose? For what it is worth, we have only one earth.
The Author

The author of the "Nature Poetry" number of The Kansas School Naturalist was a professor of biology at KSTC from 1929 until his retirement in 1968. He was the chairman of the committee that founded the Naturalist in 1954, and was the editor for its first fourteen years. Breukelman Hall, the biology portion of the science-mathematics complex, was named in his honor in 1970. He is working on another issue of the Naturalist, to deal with the environment; this will probably appear in April 1974.

I wish to acknowledge, in addition to those mentioned elsewhere, the following:

Dr. Robert J. Boles for the photograph of the stone fence, page 11;
Dr. Dwight Spencer for the photograph of the coyote, page 6;
The National Audubon Society for the photograph of the raccoon, page 9;
My wife Ruth for her careful reading of the manuscript and for assistance in the selection of my own verse; my granddaughters, Felisa and Geri Yoder, for their help in the page arrangement.
All photographs not otherwise credited were taken by the author.

KEY TO QUOTATIONS
ON FRONT COVER

1. RUBAIYAT, Omar Khayyam, 1070-1123, translated from Persian by Edward Fitzgerald, 1809-1883.
2. CUCKOO SONG, Anonymous, about 1250
3. ALL FOOLS, George Chapman, 1559-1634
4. ODE, Thomas Gray, 1716-1771
5. YARROW UNVISITED, William Wordsworth, 1770-1850
6. FROM GREENLAND'S ICY MOUNTAINS, Reginald Heber, 1783-1826
7. CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE, Lord Byron, 1788-1826
8. THE OWL AND THE PUSSYCAT, Edward Lear, 1812-1888
9. WHEN LILACS LAST IN DOORYARD BLOOM'D, Walt Whitman, 1819-1892
10. TWO-SCORE AND TEN, John Trowbridge, 1827-1916
11. AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL, Katharine Lee Bates, 1859-1929
12. EACH IN HIS OWN TONGUE, William Carruth, 1856-1924
13. APRIL RAIN, Robert Loveman, 1864-1923
14. ODE TO WALT WHITMAN, Stephen Vincent Benet, 1898-1943
15. FERN HILL, Dylan Thomas, 1914-1953
BETA BETA BETA CONVENTION

The annual district convention of the Northcentral Region of Beta Beta Beta, honorary biological society, will be held at Kansas State Teachers College on March 22 and 23, 1974. The local chapter will host the convention.

1974 WILDGAME DINNER

The sixth annual Biology Club Wildgame Dinner will be held on Saturday, November 23, in conjunction with the BBB convention. Proceeds from the Wildgame Dinner will go to the Frank Agrelius Scholarship fund. If you have any wildgame you would be willing to contribute to the dinner, please call the Biology Department at 316-343-1200, extension 311.

THE AUDUBON SCREEN TOUR

A great deal of concern is voiced today concerning the impact and effect of modern man and his technology upon our land, and the native plants and animals. You are urged to see the last Audubon Screen Tour film of the 1973-1974 series, as it will be of special interest in this area.

March 20, 1974—Frank Heimans, “What Have You Done With My Country”?

For further information contact either Dr. John Ransom, Biology Department, or Special Events, Kansas State Teachers College. The film will be shown in Albert Taylor Hall at 7:30 p.m.