

Transcript: A Lament for the Earth by Alice Oswald (March 2022)

OK, I'm going to start with two poems, one by a Ukrainian poet from Odessa and one by a Russian poet from Moscow.

And the first poem is by Ludmila Khersonsky. I've probably pronounced that wrong, and it's translated by Valzhyna Mort.

'She dreamed a humanitarian convoy' is the title.

She dreamed a humanitarian convoy entered the city.

Covered with a sheet head to toe, she sleeps, tucking her knees.

always on her right side, while a woman watches her back,

this is how one sleeps in the time of

humanitarian wars.

This is how in all times

all tribes sleep,

waking only from silence, silence is a threat,

during silence, do not open

your door—

they are there, humanitarians with their inverted eyes.

And this is a poem by Marina Tsvetaeva, translated by Ilya Kaminsky and Jean Valentine.

This poem was written in 1915 and it's called 'I know the truth'.

I know the truth! Give up all other truths.

No time on earth for people to kill each other.

[Find the full poem in [Dark Elderberry Branch: Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva](#)]

So this lecture is called lament for the Earth, addressing the challenge to nature poetry.

And of course, that challenge goes on changing.

The death of the Earth, famine, crop failure, aborted seed, confused seasons, dead bodies left lying, thin, cries of the living, animals walking about as light as wickerwork, starved, unsteady.

Funeral fires, oboes, shrieking women.

All this was imagined and written down almost 3000 years ago in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter.

Demeter is Horophoros, the goddess of seasons, whose daughter became the bride of the underworld.

Two traditions intersect in her story.

The tradition of lament and the tradition of nature poetry.

Both of which are attempts to communicate with something outside human structures of thought.

And to that end, they express what Emile M. Cioran called the last stage of lyricism.

When we're 1000 miles away from poetry, he said, we still participate in it by that sudden need to scream— the last stage of lyricism.

Not all nature poets would accept the scream as their ancestor.

There is, after all, a more well-mannered tradition. The tradition of the sigh, which can be traced back through pastoral and elegy. And that's what most people mean when they think about nature writing.

But the sigh is not vigorous enough to escape what we think we already know.

I would like to reinstate the scream as a formal requirement for thinking about the natural world, or if not the scream, then at least the shout.

With that declaration behind me, I'm going to speak to you today about the earth.

The mighty photocopier which has no copy of itself.

I hope to show some gratefulness for the supply of leaves just now on the point of being printed, each tree species with a set of replicas of last year's leaves, and yet each leaf particular.

So that the character in that Borges story, I mean Funes who fell off his horse and was disabled and could do nothing else after that but sit memorising facts.

He could remember not only every leaf in its singularity, but and I'll quote it.

'The truth was Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree in every patch of forest, but every time he had passed or imagined that leaf.'

I suppose the mind of Funes must sometimes have resembled these images of the several selves of a poplar leaf, by Gary Fabian Miller.

I wish a poem could work like that, turning slowly green as it proceeds.

This is what Gary says about these leaves.

'In the spring of 1985 in Lincolnshire, I made a record of the photosynthesis of a Poplar tree as it was leafing.

Investigating the emergence from the bud of a translucent, pink, green-veined cluster of cells. Then the flood of all the colours we call green, percolating the leaves as the spring days lengthened.

Each morning I gathered a ribbon of leaves, placed them one at a time in the enlarger clip and printed directly from and through them.

I followed the same routine for 30 days until the tree had reached its full chlorophyll rich greenness.

Or there are these beach leaves by Andy Goldsworthy about to be scattered by a current.

The photographer has overtaken the instant and found what it feels like to be incidental.

This image makes me want to think about the complaint of Job, who said wilt thou break a leaf being driven to and fro.

Perhaps it's immoderate to pay so much attention to leaves, but there it is. Once Funes has been mentioned, then the question of singularity must be addressed.

Or as Hopkins might have put it, the question of selving and unselving, which motivates all human behaviour.

There is a trace of Hopkins in the mania of Funes. There is a trace of Funes in the beautiful black and white detail of this photograph by Salgado.

Not one leaf missed out.

After looking at that photograph, I had the sense for several days of having seen the leaves as they see themselves.

Or if sight is too small a word for the absorption of light by chlorophyll, then at least I had an impression of the speed of light and the copying faculty of light being similarly caught by the lens and the leaf.

As if trees had waited millions of years for a camera to acknowledge their dark light to-fro, non-linear understanding of time.

This is a dangerous direction of thought.

It would be healthier to speak like Glaucus in the Iliad with his gentle generalising grievance.

Glaucus was about to throw a spear at a man when the man called out to him. Who are you, Sir, I haven't seen you before in this battle.

To which Glaucus answered, don't ask about my background, my lineage is like a lineage of leaves.

The wind blows the leaves to the earth and the following spring breeds new leaf into the woods.

That is how one generation dies, and a new one takes its place.

Well, those broadly speaking, are the two styles I mentioned: the sigh and the scream.

The tradition of humans mattering as little as leaves.

And the tradition of leaves mattering as much as humans.

Replaceable and irreplaceable loss.

I don't know which is worse.

Two types of lament match those two types of loss.

There is Threnos, a professional and consoling lament, composed most often by men. In its various forms: the elegy, the old, the epitaph, the obituary, Threnos brings perspective and information to the bereaved. And a kind of calm.

Threnos provides the tone of this short poem from the Palatine Anthology.

Dear earth,

Take into your body the old Amyntichus.

And remember his hard work for your sake.

In you he always firmly set the stems of olive trees.

So, in return, lie gently round his aged head.

And dress yourself in flowers in the spring.

It is quietly implied by this poet that olive trees and flowers are a fair replacement for a man.

Like Glaucus, this poet turns a self into a type.

That is Threnos.

Goös is the female tradition, the keening tradition, and it does not accept replacement. Neither the replacement of one life for another, nor the replacement of one moment for another.

Keening dwells, howls, repeats.

Keening does not just mourn, it expresses an altered state of mind, a kind of amazed timelessness or, as Denise Riley describes it, the extraordinary feeling of a temporality.

In Riley's case, a temporality came over her with a thud, not as a theory, but as a response to losing her son.

In her book length essay, *Time Lived, Without its Flow*, she writes of realising that inhabiting the drift of time is a mutable perception, one which can stop, leaving you breathing but stranded, stock-still.

Female lament is an attempt to articulate that unspeakable state.

It has traditionally been loud, shrill, performative, oral, repetitive, disturbing, nonlinear, inconsolable.

Its drift is against dailiness, against forgetting, against life itself, even to the point of stirring up revenge so that at least since the 6th century BC, there have been legal restrictions on its practise, with the result that it only appears in literature in disguised or sanitised form.

Often this type of lament refuses to use human syntax.

It adopts an interspecies language in which women shriek like birds or stand with arms raised, as if they've turned into trees.

And they do this not just by way of complaining, but as a means of communicating with beings which are outside time.

The dead, for example, who need to be reminded where they are.

Or the gods.

So that almost inadvertently, keening speaks a kind of Esperanto in which trees, birds, corpses, gods, humans, and the earth itself can communicate across time zones.

I'm very interested in this Esperanto because it suits my sense, but trees have a different way of inhabiting time, which Salgado communicates through his overtaken instance and which Funes must have known in the all at once worlds of his memory.

Lime trees, for example, growing steadily in close-knit colonies for hundreds of years. When you look into the crown of a line, it seems to express a kind of future perfect or continuous past, which, like bereavement, leaves you breathing but stranded, stock-still.

You might learn how to grow a tree, or eat its fruit, or worry about its survival. You might write a nature poem explaining the damaging effects of pollution on protective lichen.

Or even like David Attenborough, speed up a film of trees in order to insist they are similar to ourselves.

But that is all so much Threnos.

None of those approaches meets the central imaginative demand that time itself is part of a tree's singularity, and you cannot apprehend it without altering your mind.

You principle of song, what are you for now?

Perking up under any spasmodic light

To trot out your shadowed warblings?

Mince, slight pillar. And sleek down

Your furriness. Slim as a whipping wire

Shall be your hope, and ultraflexible.

Flap thinly, sheet of beaten tin.

That won't affectionately plump up

More cushioned and receptive lays.

But little song, don't so instruct yourself

For none are hanging around to hear you.

They have gone bustling or stumbling well away.

Denise Riley's Part Song for her son.

Composed stoppingly of 20 sections, and the one I've just read you is the first, provides a musical answer to some of the conceptual questions raised by her essay.

Inside the seizure of bereavement, she asks how could such a striking condition ever be voiced.

What can we do with such solitary expressions of violently new and hitherto unexpected states of temporal perception.

Her essay's claim, tentatively offered, is that poetry is itself an expression of a temporality.

A poem she says may well be carried by an oscillation, a to and fro, rather than by some forward-leaning chronological drive. It both sanctions and enacts an experience of time which is nonlinear.

All poems, of course, contain that oscillating or circling drift.

But some poems also emit something closer to raw noise. Something like the scream of Cioran.

To a person screaming the sound never escapes the present moment. The mind has to cease in order to scream and there is a trace of that in Denise Riley's poem.

Flap, thinly, sheet of beaten tin.

When you bend tin, it produces a tin cry, weak and inadvertent, a horrible image of defeat by grief.

Thin, sheet, beat, tin.

That line traps me in its mirror and I stand in front of it stock-still remembering memory. Hearing every other inadvertent sound given off by a human in shock.

I met a musicologist recently who could hear the voice of tin trapped in a bronze rivet alloyed with the sweeter, pinker, more radiant sound of copper.

He had hung 2 rods on threads from each hand and he chimed them together to hear how the bronze inadvertently uttered first a smashing, then a ringing, then a shrill tingling, then a thrum.

He called it the timbre of bronze.

And he defined timbre as the spectral difference between one type of sound and another. A measure of singularity.

What he was hearing was the self of bronze.

Like the various selves in that Hopkins poem, each mortal thing does one thing and the same, deals out that being indoors each one dwells, selves goes itself.

Myself, it speaks and spells crying: what I do is me, for that I came.

Having listened to the self of bronze, the musicologist picks up an iron rivet and strikes it, and an older, more dignified pane rings out in which he can hear long bands of iron dwelling in rocks, pressure of mullock, and contamination, mining, washing, blast of a furnace, hammering, shaping, chiming.

Yes, he grasps the whole biography of iron in its roaring note, more like a pang than a clang.

And after the pane of iron then comes the xylophone.

He braces himself for the xylophone, each of whose bars remembers a rosewood branch breathing in the Amazon.

And the constant passing of the life of light colliding with each leaf cell.

And while most of us are getting on with work, revving engines, drilling, barking, chattering, lecturing or often flying silently through virtual worlds with no weight at all, it is good to know that a musicologist is sitting in a high room in Sheffield, absolutely actual and echo-located.

A listener.

His feet on the floor provide roots for his lifted arms.

His head bald and drum-like listens with its skin, with its very eyes, to the trembling past lives of leaves.

When Gerard Manley Hopkins was a child, he was taught to draw by his mother.

And developed his own practise of copying the stance of a subject with his body before putting pencil to paper.

Chinese calligraphers have a similar practice. When copying a text, they begin by inscribing the forms onto the surface of the heart. Then they cover the original and copy from the heart onto the page in one flourish.

That way they can draw out the expressive character of the script, which goes beyond the merely informative scheme of a template.

Not every artist allows for this copying pause.

Three seconds of interspecies shock, before drawing a line or making a sound.

You might call it the keening style of art, as opposed to the elegiac, but Hopkins has a better word: prepossession.

He speaks of a prepossession which flushes matter, as if he had found from inside the feeling of a pose a flush of already thereness which produced it.

Perhaps he could have used the word 'personality', which is the word Tagore used in 1925 when speaking about the a priori selving of the senses.

Personality Tagore said, is the one thing that lies at the basis of all reality.

Apart from personality, there is no meaning in creation.

Water is water because I am I.

But 'prepossession' is a less closed word than personality.

'Prepossession' suggests the existence of a communal pre self, which is singularly felt.

And that's why the poetry of Hopkins is so dance-like as if you were moving from one pose to another to find out that being indoors each one dwells.

Hopkins only used the word 'prepossession' in his early journals. He later substituted the words 'inscape' and 'instress', which implied that he was no longer copying gestures, but still noticing perspectives. As for example, in this sketch of an ash twig made in 1870.

And he writes underneath it, this skeleton inscape of a spray end of ash I broke at Wimbledon that summer is worth noticing for the suggested globe. It is leaf on the left and keys on the right.

A year later, March 1871, he's looking at ash twigs again.

This is the time he says to study inscape in the spraying of trees.

For the swelling buds, carry them to a pitch which the eye could not else gather.

For out of much, much more. Out of little, not much. Out of nothing, nothing.

The male ashes are very boldly jotted with the heads of the bloom, which tuft the outer ends of the branches.

I thought it would be interesting to set out this journal entry in lines, as if it were written in free verse.

You can hear the way the language lifts from a commentary to a shout when Hopkins writes an actual poem and the very noise of the verse catches the prepossessions of the trees.

The journal entry is like a musicologist describing a xylophone, whereas a poem, for example Binsey Poplars, is like the moment when he lifts his mallet and hits the xylophone, which sings the very falling of the trees which made it.

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,

Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,

All felled, felled, are all felled.

So there you have two listeners from different centuries, but with similar enthusiasms attending patiently to the selves and pre-selves of things.

And there are others, with prosthetic ears and sleepless brains. Listening harder, listening further, listening beyond the scale of what it means to listen.

An array of underwater hydrophones can hear icebergs weeping off the coast of Antarctica.

What does it mean when a huge, white, unstable shape emits a sound which can't be heard except by computers which draw what they conceive like this?

To be told that the image on the left represents the harmonic tremor of ice moving smoothly over the seabed, while the one on the right has suffered an icequake, is to notice a certain numbness creeping into me.

Like Jobe being questioned by God about the scale of his operations.

Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the Earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measure thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it?

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the cornerstone thereof. When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddling band for it, And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and doors, and said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?

In other words, water is water because I am I.

The argument between Jobe and God is all about singularity.

Jobe asks, wilt thou break a leaf being driven to and fro?

And in the character of a leaf he refuses to be unselved by his companions.

He keeps refuting their logic with the same phrase: I will maintain my ways before God. Insisting that his suffering is not about punishment but personhood.

Jobe does maintain his ways before God, but it isn't certain that he would maintain his ways before the four high sensors and 24 low sensors orbiting the Earth on satellites in search of heat from ballistic missiles.

To address those strange instruments and carry on living under the hypothesis of what they might detect is to meet a ray of nothingness which defeats the self from inside out. And that is a harder challenge.

Which brings me back to where I started with the death of the Earth: famine, crop failure, aborted seed, confused seasons, dead bodies left lying, thin, cries of the living animals, walking about as light as wickerwork, starved, unsteady, funeral pyres, oboes, grieving women.

All of which was imagined, acted out, and written down almost 3000 years ago in the Homeric hymn to Demeter.

Which is a poem composed before 700 BC.

It's about 500 lines long. It's anonymous, and in common with the other Homeric hymns, it's something half way between a prayer and a poem.

In other words, its language is not just aesthetic, but purposeful.

It aims to make Demeter present.

Demeter. She's known as the corn goddess, although her name is apparently a Cretan form of gaia mater, mothering earth.

The hymn to Demeter is a making present, an imagining forth of the Earth itself.

And when the earth appears, she is an old bowed woman.

Dressed in dark clothes, sitting under an olive tree by the side of the road, suffering the painful cramps of grief.

She withdrew from the company of Gods. She came down from the mountain. She travelled into human cities and their fertile fields, disguising her looks.

No man, no well-dressed woman recognised her as she sat by the road, under the shade of a bushy olive tree, suffering her grief.

Like a very old woman beyond having children, beyond the blessing of love.

She might be any one of us as she sits there copying the posture of human endurance.

Or perhaps it's we who copy Demeter's posture whenever we suffer loss. That's what the myth offers. A conflation of personal and supernatural grief being dramatised by the natural world.

As everyone knows, Demeter lost her daughter Persephone.

The story says that Persephone was picking flowers: roses, violets, hyacinth, crocus, iris, narcissus.

Persephone herself, as the poem describes her was calyx faced.

And she was wandering in a soft field beside the sea.

She had companions with her, but the narcissus, a kind of wild daffodil, had been set there as her own particular trap, her weakness.

To use Hélène Cixous' brilliant expression, it was not Persephone who picked the flower, but the flower that picked her.

And this is how it's described.

It was astonishing and flaring, a miracle both to gods and humans.

From its bulb there grew 100 heads and the scent was so stupefying that everything the air, the earth, and the salty sea began laughing.

A few months ago, if you'd stepped into a glasshouse at the Botanic Gardens just down the road from here, you might have verified that description.

Even as you slid the door open, the scent of a narcissus rose to meet you like a ghost. Astonishing, flaring, miraculous, stupefying such a shock to the senses that you would have stood there laughing.

Narcissus has the same root, or perhaps I should say it has the same bulb, as the words 'narcotic' and 'narcolepsy'.

It means pure seizure.

And even as I say it, I lose myself and start to drift. Like Persephone, I'm in danger of falling into a swoon, abducted by the memory of that unworldly scent.

May the 1st. This is Gerard Manley Hopkins in his journal. Found some daffodils, wild but fading. You see the squareness of the scaling well when you have several in your hand.

The bright yellow corolla is seeded with very fine spangles, like carnations which give it a glister and lie on a ribbing which makes it like cloth of gold.

I bought a patch of wild ground. This is Ted Hughes now, gathering speed in order to overtake the instant.

I bought a patch of wild ground.

In March it surprised me.

Suddenly I saw what I owned,

A cauldron of daffodils, boiling gently.

That night, on my pillow,

My brain was a chandelier of daffodils!

Wings pouring light, faces bowed,

Dressed for Heaven.

The souls of all those daffodils, as I killed them,

Had gone to ground inside me –

They were packed.

I could see right into their flame-stillness

Like seeing right into the eye-pupil

Of a person fast asleep, as if I'd lifted the eyelid.

I could see right into their flame-stillness

Like seeing right into the eye-pupil

Of a person fast asleep, as if I'd lifted the eyelid.

Anyone who passes a narcissus if they know the myth of Demeter will read it as a pictogram of Persephone's amazement and Demeter's shock.

The three of them are wired to each other in a circuit of memory.

Narcissus, a noun meaning numbness, rapture, atemporal amazement, concussion. A frilled flare or flower secretly clean, soaked, scented, inaudible but shaped like a fanfare. A sculpted scream, an ear trumpet, a lamentation, a prepossession or prior haunting. A ghost of light already trapped inside the capacity to see light.

Claimed by such a being, Persephone vanished.

She became the bride of Hades, Lord of the Underworld. She crossed from one time zone to another.

And as she disappeared, she screamed with a shrill sound. She called out to her father, but he was elsewhere, sitting in a temple, deafened by the hum of prayers.

The voice of Persephone went on screaming behind her. The mountains echoed, the sea echoed, Demeter heard it. I heard her voice throbbing through the barren air as if she was suffering violence. But I couldn't see her anywhere with my eyes.

Only the sun who sees everything knew what had happened and said: Mighty Demeter, you deserve to know. I respect you and I pity your agony, for your slim-stemmed daughter.

It was Zeus's fault. He gave her as a bride to Hades, who with his horses snatched her up and carried her screaming into the misty dark.

But Goddess give up your great lamentation.

Give up your goös.

So much noise, it's like a damaged field recording of the festival, which this poem commemorates.

The Eleusinian Mysteries celebrated at Eleusis just outside Athens included a dramatisation of the myth of Demeter.

The ritual took nine days and it began with people carrying boxes from Eleusis to Athens, in one of which laid a statue of Iacchus, God of shouting.

Imagine what happened when the box was opened.

What a relief for anyone who'd been repressing a shout for the last 12 months and what an insight. What an insistence to endow the very act of shouting with divinity so that each person's voice could have a share in it.

Once the shouting had begun, then there was a day of sea bathing, a day of pig slaughtering, a night vigil, a dream incubation, then a twenty mile procession to Eleusis with various stopping places.

At the boundary between Athens and Eleusis, descendants of King Crocus tied saffron-yellow threads round the left wrist and right ankle of each initiate.

While mockers shouted obscenities from a bridge.

Then there was night long revelry, torchlit dancing and at last the sanctuary at Eleusis was entered.

What happened next was secret.

But a trail of references suggests that the hymn was spoken in the dark. It's possible that a shadow performance took place followed by a blaze of light in which an ear of corn was cut silently.

Then people went out, dazed, into the fields where they shouted at the sky, 'rain' and at the Earth 'conceive'.

One man who was there said I came out of the hall feeling like a stranger to myself.

And another, a historian, said the life of the Greeks would be unlivable if they were prevented from observing the most sacred mysteries which hold the whole human race together.

And luckily they still do it.

If I can get it to work.

I might need help.

Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I think that the difficulty of seeing it is all part of it.

It was Zeus's fault he gave her as a bride to Hades, who with his horses, snatched her up and carried her screaming into the misty dark. But goddess give up your great lamentation. Give up your keening.

Demeter did not give up. She swept screaming over the earth like a bird. She sat by the roadside, crying.

She went to work as a wet nurse for the family of Metanira and tried to make Metanira's baby immortal, but it didn't work and that is when the whole earth went into shock.

Then she completely withdrew from social life. She sat there, wasting with longing for her daughter.

She brought a terrible, cruel year to our fields.

The ground sent up no grain, she had it hidden in her grip.

Quantities of curved ploughs pulled in vain by oxen.

Quantities of white barley falling in vain on the mud.

She might have murdered all humans with her evil family.

And stopped all the joy of festivals to the gods.

But, we know how the story ends. Zeus relents, Persephone is fetched from the underworld. But having eaten a pomegranate, she's condemned to return there for a third of the year. And that is how time starts up again.

And the seasons are created.

Demeter is given the title Horophoros, which means Minister of Seasons, Keeper of the Hours, and yet through the performance of the poem, the yellow flower, the shouting, the double shock of a mother and a daughter, and the vision of the death of the Earth, a photograph of stuck time has already been printed into us.

It's worth remembering what Sopatros said about the mystery of Eleusis: I came out of that place feeling like a stranger to myself.

Poetry doesn't offer arguments, only small alterations.

So I'd like to end this lecture by noticing a couple of prepossessions which just might be starting to alter.

In 1928, Paul Valéry wrote an essay called the Conquest of Ubiquity, in which he pointed out that all the art forms include a physical part which has been altered by our altered understanding of matter, space, and time.

In the 100 or so years since he wrote that essay, I wonder whether there's been another, more serious alteration. I wonder whether subjectivity itself has been damaged, but might still be repaired.

In 1935, Walter Benjamin, inspired by Valéry, wrote an essay called The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.

Whose claim is that the whole premise of art has been altered by the reproducibility of sound and image. Since it's no longer possible to communicate mystery which he called aura by means of the actual presence of an object.

Both those lines of thought go back to the Battle of Troy.

Where Glaucus sort of removes his presence, removes his subjectivity, by likening his family to a flock of reproducible leaves.

Don't ask about my background, he says, my lineage is like a lineage of leaves.

The wind blows the leaves to the earth and the spring breathes new leaf into the woods. That's how one generation dies and another one takes its place.

The correct response to his devaluing of the human might have been for Diomedes to kill him there and then.

Instead, the two men discovered that their parents were acquaintances. They swap armour and make a promise of friendship.

It's as if they had suddenly seen another way of looking at the leaves like Funes, seeing each leaf in its singularity.

And that is what I call addressing the challenge of nature poetry.

[APPLAUSE]