



BLOEDEL RESERVE WRITING PROMPT INTRODUCTION

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I. Introduction: An Eco-poetical View

Poetry is in part the art of *attention*, that is, of noticing. And it is in part the art of *connection*—of making a choice to associate one thing with another thing, whether by juxtaposition (placing things side by side) or via simile or metaphor (comparing or identifying one thing with another).

As it happens, these are also two of the most important aspects of any ecological view, from the human perspective. “Ecology”—our understanding of the myriad processes that make up what we think of as “the environment”—is impossible without both *attention* to what surrounds us and a sense of the *connections* that underlie and inform what we see and study.

One problem I face, in my work as a poet and teacher, is that we’re overwhelmed with information about our environment. We might rise in the morning and note the weather (fair or foul), then read a story in a newspaper about the latest species extinction somewhere far away from where we are (we feel bad), but then we recycle some plastic or glass (we congratulate ourselves); we take a walk in the woods (we feel good), but then we see a discarded pop bottle or chip bag (we feel bad, possibly angry); we read another news story about our ecological predicament (we feel bad, probably more than a little hopeless), but then we remember a summer camping experience we had years ago, or perhaps a mountainside walk with a lover, or a grandparent, or some other golden memory (we feel good)...

It is impossible to untangle this knot of intellectual, sensual, and emotional knowledge without severing something important in us that makes us human. Most of us “feel bad” when we hear yet

more distressing news about the environment—but more, we feel *impotent*, when faced with all this conflicting information, impressions, and memory. What can we do, as individuals?

One thing poetry can provide is, if not always a tool to disentangle this knot, then a *container* where all the strands of the knot can coexist. In a poem, you can place the news article you just read next to your childhood camping experiences, alongside your recycling as well as your doubts about whether recycling really matters, alongside that glimpse of Mount Rainier you caught on the ferry, its majesty as well as its danger.

And, it is a container with wheels—a *vehicle*. The poem *moves forward*. It goes somewhere. You can travel with it, the poem, and perhaps find yourself in a new place. Whether you are the writer of the poem or the reader (or hearer), you are moving forward with the poem, for a little while.

Thus, the poem becomes a means of *apprehending* the landscape, and our place in it. I like *apprehending* better than *understanding* because the Latin root of *apprehend* means “to take hold of, to grasp.” Ecology, our environment, the climate crisis—these are very large things, and we struggle with them not only because they are so much larger than we are, but also because we are *inside them*. (The ecological theorist Timothy Morton calls them “hyperobjects.”) There is too much here to *understand*, ranging from global ecological changes to our own deep psychological needs, fantasies, suspicions, and experiences, all in a constant state of active flux. Like the blind men in Aesop’s fable of the elephant, we can’t take it all in at once. But there are means by which we can grasp it—our ecological situation, our ecological predicament—whether to seize or stroke, whether to touch or strike, whether to rejoice or mourn. The poem is a space for that.

II. Bloedel Reserve

As geographers will tell you, there is *space*, and then there is *place*. And all place is, ecologically speaking, a palimpsest.

“Palimpsest” is a fancy word that simply means a surface that has been written on again and again, written over, smudged out, erased, reinscribed. Traces of earlier writing are often present, for those who are paying attention.

Bloedel Reserve is even more a palimpsest than most places around it. It has a history and legacy in deep time—geologic time, and the time represented in the genetic evolution of its plant and animal life. It has a history and legacy in terms of its use and occupation by First Nations peoples. It has a history and legacy in terms of its occupation by European-American settlers, which history is intimately tied to logging, with the wholesale and comparatively sudden transformation of the landscape. It has a history and legacy in terms of its transformation into a country estate by the Collins and Bloedel families. And it has a history and legacy as a reserve, including both the managed gardens and the “wilderness” areas.

When you step onto the property at Bloedel Reserve, you are being invited to take a walk in space, inside a place. But you are also being invited to take a walk in time.

And into this walk, into this layering of the landscape's history and use, its flora and fauna, parts that are pleasing to the eye and parts that are perhaps less pleasing, you are bringing, if nothing else, *yourself*. Your own history, your own desires and hopes, knowledge and ignorance, doubts and fears.

An eco-poetical experience at Bloedel acknowledges all these factors. It seeks to bring them together in language, in some kind of language-container (the poem). It pays attention. It matches this with this, and this with this. It creates a pattern of apprehension.

In Aesop's fable, the blind men only begin to understand something about the elephant's true nature when they quit arguing about their individual experiences and begin to bring those experiences together, to set them side by side, as parts of an unsuspected whole.

From apprehension can come, sometimes, a form of shared understanding.

III. How Do I Do This?

What follows is an exercise in three parts. It is meant as a set of examples, no more than that: one path you *might* take through the meadow and forest and grounds. A path that is both inward- and outward-facing.

I chose the sites to which the prompts are keyed based on my own experiences during three weeks at Bloedel—as well as the fact that all three provide a place to sit. You may try the prompts for one site, or two, or all three. You may try them at different times of day, on different days, or (especially) across different seasons of the year. You may complete all three inside an hour or two, if you like.

You need to take a printout of this document with you, and a pencil or pen. Or, you can access it on your phone (although phone receptivity at Bloedel can alter every few paces). Personally, I like to write longhand when I am working outside—the computer can wait. In the pages that follow, I've left space for you to write directly on the printout.

You should also take a book with you. Which book? Any book. But preferably a book you've read and cared about, at some point in your life.

As you respond to the prompts, you can respond in complete sentences or paragraphs, or in fragments, or, if you feel comfortable, in lines of poetry—whatever feels quickest and truest and easiest to you. Don't overthink: simply answer the questions. Some ask for you to describe what's around you. Some ask you to describe what's inside you. Some ask you to use your imagination.

The important thing, as you proceed, is that you **DO NOT TURN ANY PAGE** until you have completed the instruction on that page. **Do NOT read ahead.** Take each instruction in turn—which is how you are encountering the Bloedel landscape.

IV. Then What?

When you are done, if you like, write out or type up your responses, stripping away the instructions. And you will have a poem, or at least a proto-poem: a field of language that is tethered to experience. Part of that experience Bloedel made possible, and part of it you brought with you. Some parts may be in lines of verse, some will be prose—the form will shift as you go. Just as the landscape does.

Some people I've led through related prompts object that their responses can't really be poetry, they're just—responses. But isn't that what poetry is? A *response*, read in a certain light, achieved in a certain way. (This is why we habitually refer to all sorts of excellent things that aren't poems as, somehow, “poetic.”)

Some people like to use their responses as raw material for poem(s) they will work on later. But others like the grouping of these little texts, on their own terms, for their own sakes—like beads on a string.

If we'd been working together in person on a non-COVID afternoon, I would have used a single set of prompts. I would have asked the group to venture out into the Bloedel landscape, each person finding his, her, or their own spot to work, each with the same set of instructions, only in a different place, for an hour or so. Then, we would have gathered together again as a group and read our responses aloud to each other, moving from person to person (first person reading her response to the first instruction, second person reading their response to the second instruction, etc.) so that together we created a poem-journal of our collective experience at Bloedel, that particular group on that particular day.

Your Bloedel will never be my Bloedel. And even your Bloedel will change, if you return. It will have changed, and you will have changed, and so will your responses.

One thing I like about poetry is that it can be as intimate—as private—or as public as we want to make it. If when you're done you'd like to share your responses with the Bloedel staff, please send to aweber@bloedelreserve.org. Or, if you'd like to keep them to yourself, for yourself, that's fine, too.