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How to Cite: Collins, L 2017 'Only the Dead Can Be Forgiven': Contemporary Women Poets and Environmental Melancholia. *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 5(1): 3, pp. 1–21, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.12>

Published: 30 January 2017

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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ARTICLE

'Only the Dead Can Be Forgiven': Contemporary Women Poets and Environmental Melancholia

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Ecological crisis challenges the regenerative capacity of nature, revealing all life to exist in anticipation of death. In the face of this realisation, the human subject enters a melancholic state, which, in turn, permits deeper insight into the fate of the more-than-human world. The rhetoric of loss, identified by Juliana Schiesari as a key to melancholy, can be traced throughout contemporary poetry, which offers a means to contemplate the temporal rupture of environmental destruction at the same time as it acknowledges the challenges to representation it brings. This essay will explore these dynamics in a range of poems by contemporary Irish and British women, revealing an encounter between the embodied self and nature that has profound effects on the construction of the poetic subject, and on traditional approaches to form.

Ecological crisis presents the contemporary world with an insurmountable problem of loss; loss so profound that it shapes the fate not only of the individual but also of the whole of humanity. The regenerative capacity of nature, itself an enduring poetic trope, is now fundamentally questioned, so that living in anticipation of death becomes a condition that exceeds the melancholic states of human self-reflection, to embrace our relationship with the more-than-human world. The insights that emerge as part of this process shape contemporary poetry by women in important ways. This poetry, in turn, offers a means to contemplate the temporal rupture of environmental destruction at the same time as it acknowledges the challenges to representation it brings. The rhetoric of loss can be traced throughout this work, especially where the embodied self is caught between engagement with, and withdrawal from, the natural world. This essay examines how the recognition of loss shapes representation of both human subject and natural world in recent poetry from Britain and Ireland.

The role of emotion in ecological relations is the central concern of this essay, and it is a feature that draws attention to the difference between the direct sensory perception of the world and its interpretation by social or cultural means.

Since ecology is a study of relationships, it is not surprising that personal attachment plays a role – though sometimes an unacknowledged one – in scientific engagement with the natural world (Windle, 1992, 364). Emotions are often intensified by prolonged engagement with the non-human – the 'felt nearness' to which Arne Naess attributes our connection even with remote others (Diehm 25). Greater scrutiny of the dynamics of feeling also opens new perspectives on the definition of 'environment' itself which, as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman have pointed out, may not be 'in some distant place, but within homes, schools, workplaces and neighborhoods' (Alaimo and Hekman, loc. 222). To rethink the role of familiarity in our environmental encounters is to become more attentive to the power of feeling to deepen our reflection on ecological threat.

For Naess, the experiential quality of our engagement with nature lies at the heart of biocentrism; our identification with the non-human other prompts a deep sense of sadness at environmental destruction (Naess 1989). Biocentrism's claim that 'all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth' draws attention to the interwoven character of individual and collective identities (Devall and Sessions 1985, 67). However, as Val Plumwood has pointed out, this removal of boundaries troubles the binary between emotional and rational states, which has been necessary to a construction of ecologically responsible human behaviour, grounded in ethical reflection. In this scheme 'the particular and the emotional are seen as the enemy of the rational, as corrupting, capricious, and self-interested' (Plumwood 1991, 6). If, as she argues, 'the 'moral emotions' are set aside as irrelevant or suspect, as merely subjective or personal, we can only base morality on the rules of abstract reason, on the justice and rights of the impersonal public sphere' (Plumwood 1991, 6). In her essay Plumwood highlights the apparent tensions between private and public, emotional and rational, in gender terms, suggesting the problematic alignment between the traditional feminine and

the denigrated ethics of personal care (Plumwood 1991, 7–10). Likewise, the poets examined here combine experiential and conceptual explorations of environmental loss, refuting the demands of fixed philosophical positions. For them, ecological melancholia is situated in an uneasy space between a private emotion, at times difficult to disclose, and a recognition of shared loss that transcends the particularity of experience.

Creative Melancholia

Melancholia has a long and complex history. The first use of the term, once ascribed to Aristotle, signified a condition that could at once trouble and inspire the sufferer (Middeke and Wald 2011, 1). Living in the shadow of death intensifies human feelings of estrangement and insignificance, but the manifestations of these feelings are many. Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, was among the foremost practitioners to write on the subject: he acknowledged the need to read the condition through its clinical examples, which were not 'amenable to being grouped together into a single entity' (Freud 2006, 310). Nonetheless he concluded:

Melancholia is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment (Freud 2006, 310).

Though these characteristics are clearly expressed, Freud acknowledged that loss could take many forms, and that the experiencing subject might even be unaware that it had taken place. It is this uncertainty, this failure of meaningful connection, which haunts the contemporary poetic encounter with the natural world. The contemplation of death that environmental crisis precipitates does not prefigure a process of mourning for the lost other, instead it suggests the entwined fates of human subject and ecosystem – a pattern suggested by the Freudian conjoining of depression and narcissism that Julia Kristeva also advocates: 'This time, however, we shall

not encounter the bright and fragile amatory idealization; on the contrary, we shall see the shadow cast on the fragile self, hardly dissociated from the other, precisely by the *loss* of that essential other' (Kristeva 1989, 5).

As the figure of Narcissus suggests, the spaces of melancholy are themselves spaces of reflection. Even before the Romantic writers linked art, nature and religion, poets used the natural world as a means to seek solitude and to express their need for quiet contemplation:

Most pleasant it is at first, to such as are melancholy given, to lie in bed whole days, and keep their chambers, to walk alone in some solitary grove, betwixt wood and water, by a brook side, to meditate upon some delightful and pleasant subject, which shall affect them most (Burton 1800, 126).

This understanding of melancholy, as a condition embracing both sadness and pleasure, distinguishes it from depression, and suggests its potential to heighten self-awareness, although later definitions continue to see reflection rather than activity as a mark of the state (Radden 2000, loc. 130–133). This combination of attributes permitted the compensatory narrative that had its roots in Aristotle to re-emerge: though painful, depressive states could lead to insight, even genius, and were thus inherently valuable (Radden 2000, loc. 241). The relationship between melancholia and creativity is a problematic one, yet the temporal dynamic of withdrawal from the world and re-engagement with it through language is an important dimension of any textual study. The expression of feeling captures the immediacy of experience and takes its cue from Wordsworth's definition of poetry: as emotions recollected – and also recreated – in tranquility. This layered approach is especially applicable to contemporary poetry where formal experimentation and referential complexity extend the boundaries of representation. For Kristeva it is the emergence of the symbolic that unites embodied experience to the signification process:

Literary creation is that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect – to sadness as imprint of separation and beginning of the

symbol's sway; to joy as imprint of the triumph that settles me in the universe of artifice and symbol, which I try to harmonise in the best possible way with my experience of reality (Kristeva 1989, 22).

This harmonisation of subject and experience takes many textual forms. The writing process may capture states of grief and estrangement retrospectively and with clarity, or it may seek to render this disorientation directly in language. Poetic form is significant in expressing the process by which experience is understood, as well as highlighting how the role of the reader is constructed.

Gendered Memories

The gendered reading of melancholia is a long-established one. First understood as a masculine emotion, only much later, towards the end of the nineteenth century, did melancholia come to be associated with the feminine: this transition, from being a condition of serious reflection, to one of passing significance only, reduced melancholy's potential to yield significant creative work. Pivotal to this imaginative marginalisation is the prevailing equation of melancholy with silence: both Kristeva and Judith Butler have linked the estrangement from language to a breakdown in subjectivity, and consequent loss of authority, both political and creative (Kristeva 1989, 33–68; Butler 1997, 170–86). Here the experience of loss relates neither to a desired person nor object, but to a capacity for self-expression and, with it, valid public speech. Solitary subjectivity, when experienced by women, has been used to confirm women's poetry as 'private' or 'self-absorbed', yet Susan Wolfson has argued for the larger social or cultural significance of melancholy. Noting that, in the Romantic age, 'melancholy haunts idealism', she likens it to a 'chorus of women's social alienation and restlessness' (Wolfson 2014, 436–7). In the twenty-first century it has a similar function, reflecting unease at the replacement of democracy by a new corporate hegemony, and recording the atomisation of human existence and its significant alienation from the natural environment.

These echoes across time and space remind us that our understanding of melancholy emerges from the interwoven nature of past, present and future. Melancholia

is less often a response to an immediate stimulus than it is a memory, so that the space of reflection is one that facilitates acts of reverie and recollection. These acts often take place at the expense of attention to unfolding time: 'The insistence on the past entails a loss of the future; it creates the impression. . . of a standstill of time' (Middeke and Wald 2011, 4). In the context of ecological threat, however, there may be an unconscious conflation of fear for the future with past anxieties, an acknowledgment of the existential nature of the crisis. As Kristeva has suggested, pain in the present can awaken old traumas, and these may in turn contribute to feelings of distress that are difficult to define or address (Kristeva 1989, 5). The passage of time is important: 'trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way in which it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on' (Caruth 1995, 3–4). This 'haunting' may thus be an imprecise process and may occur as bodily sensation rather than as conscious thought. The unknowable past may have incorporated fears for the future that haunt the experiencing subject in an untimely manner.

Poetry and Ecology

The complex temporality the shapes melancholia reveals the particularity of environmental representation, and the challenges that ecofeminism faces in its consideration of nature as a feminist subject. Fear of essentialism has made feminists wary of linking female experience to the natural world, in spite of the transformative potential of this relationship, as Alaimo has outlined:

Rather than fleeing from this debased nature, associated with corporeality, mindlessness, and passivity, it would be more productive for feminist theory to undertake the transformation of gendered dualisms – nature, culture, body, mind, object, subject, resource, agency and others – that have been cultivated to denigrate and silence certain groups of human as well as non-human life (Alaimo 2008, loc. 4420).

The capacity of poetry to challenge binary thinking through multi-layered language means that it has a particular role to play in ecological representation by women. The poets whose work I examine here range from those, such as Kathleen Jamie (b. 1962) and Melanie Challenger (b. 1977), who have a deep-seated commitment to the environment, to others for whom the ecological issues play a less explicit role. These distinctions are worth noting, not least because they represent a significant diversity of creative approach. Even within ecofeminism we find 'a variety of positioned subjects with different viewpoints can unite on the basis of shared politics and ethics, rather than a unified restrictive ideological or epistemological position' (Carlassare 1999, 101), and beyond the confines of this movement are many more variations in ecological engagement. Women poets often investigate questions of subjectivity by considering the role of the individual in the more-than-human world, and by exploring the ways in which modes of poetic expression are extended by the challenges of new environments.

Writing is more than a record of experience; it is itself a form of experience. The creation of a poem from an encounter with nature both recognises the significance of this engagement and recalibrates the relationship between woman and environment, to facilitate renewed understanding. This emphasis on the private encounter is opposed by deep ecologists, who argue that by privileging subjective experience we endorse the principle of exploitation (Fox 1995, 262). The melancholy reflection marks an emptying of the ego, however, and thus rejects such interventions. Formally, the movement between public and private is often envisaged as a shift in form from traditional to avant-garde modes, but Clair Wills refutes this simple binary:

[I]t is not that 'expressive' poetry naively falls back on a stable individuality, and experimental work explores the radical absence of subjectivity. Both are responses to the reconfiguring of the relationship between public and private spheres which makes the 'private' lyric impossible, and in effect opens it out towards rhetoric (Wills 1994, 39).

All these poems, from the short lyric to the experimental sequence, describe a tension between the need to meditate on individual human experience and to move beyond it to a deeper interrogation of our place in time.

For centuries, reflections on mortality have taken place within a natural environment, where the cycles of growth and decline form a counterpart to the poet's own concerns. For twenty-first century writers, however, these analogies have been replaced by a more sustained engagement with the environment, in recognition of the deepening ecological crisis. The importance of affect in facilitating these reflections is clear: scientific data must be balanced by narratives of feeling, which not only confront the unprecedented threat to ecosystems, but also record the experience of living in these times. Emotions, in the words of Martha Nussbaum, 'acknowledge our own neediness and incompleteness before parts of the world that we do not fully control' (Nussbaum 2001, 19). In the face of ecocide, this incompleteness is an acknowledgment of our dependence upon, yet hesitation before, nature. Martin Seligman's 'learned helplessness' reflects the extent to which this loss of control may limit or destroy our agency, persuading us that no meaningful action can be taken (Seligman 1975). The stasis induced by melancholia, which permits neither speech nor action, reflects this condition, but the existential questioning that arises is a necessary precursor to meaningful intervention in the world. The poet must negotiate between unrepresentable feeling and the capacity for heightened language to prompt reflection in others. The poem, though it may describe a melancholy state, signals the subject's emergence into a world of communication where what has been learned in seclusion may at last be spoken of. Melancholia signals a temporary disintegration of bonds, yet the relationship between the human and more-than-human world becomes a focus for reflection just when it is most threatened. It is the loss of that relationship to which the subject cannot be reconciled: the recovery of language represents not an acceptance of loss but the recognition that we live with a knowledge of its proximity. This knowledge alters the way in which many poets envisage the relationship between their own embodied subjectivity and the natural world: reflections on death now suggest not the endless renewal of nature,

but rather an emptiness, a lack of meaning that fundamentally challenges poetic expression.

Melancholy Forms

Walking as a means of melancholy reflection and rhythmic exploration is at the heart of a number of the poems under consideration here. In this the melancholic may be linked to the urban flaneur, but the condition of melancholy reflection privileges the inner life over the observed world, indicating that it is the assimilation of the environment that will lie at the centre of this response. Helen Macdonald's 'Walking' offers a mobile subject and immediately challenges readers' expectations with its disorientation of language – 'Where. Why and etcetera. The head bows and nothing is' (Macdonald 2001, 42). These opening phrases draw attention to the close parallels between the walking subject and the reader poring over a troublesome text. The rupture of lyric smoothness is an important means by which contemporary poets question the redemptive qualities of the traditional nature poem, investigating instead a breakdown of trust through the use of uneven and incomplete syntax. This inchoate perspective typifies the melancholic subject, for whom inward reflection is not equalled by fluency of expression. Throughout the poem disturbing juxtapositions suggest a world of disharmony: the suggestion of 'harm' resonates beyond the speaking subject, shadowing the poem as a whole; here every positive signifier is read as a potential threat. The registration of pain draws the natural world into the speaker's ambit but refutes the signs of life – the call of the little owls, evidence of spring growth – as a palliative to trauma:

I am valorous in the face of such kindness, as ravens on pylons
 Stock doves and the roll of limestone bulks out our version
 Ripping out a throat in even dreams, eyes shut & breathing
 Concentrating on the sodden lake of the heart, and its sharp depths
 Up for retching on sweetness: sugar, tunes, airs, the memory of love.

(Macdonald 2001, 42)

Here natural and man-made worlds sit in uneasy relation, yielding energies always on the edge of the malign. The bittersweet condition of the embodied subject is recorded by the speaker as a rising sickness that reflects inner turmoil, a somatic response to conditions of threat and disturbance. Relations of trust are under threat from 'a simple action' – an act of betrayal renders the 'lake of sweet cloves and lotus' into a barren and bloodied land (42).

Macdonald's oblique treatment of circumstance, in favour of experiential language, emphasises the power of intense emotion to resist an explicatory narrative. This strategy also alerts us to how the text might be read alongside, or against, other poems in the volume that represent the natural world more explicitly. Distrust and uncertainty are treated unflinchingly, and without the consolations of resolution – a sustained purpose that Andrew Duncan admires in the collection as a whole:

The elements of Macdonald's style – the avoidance of 'functional' awareness, the use of simultaneity, the jumps between disparate ideas, the staging of complex fields of intellectual enquiry inviting long-term attention, the reliance on personal consciousness, the preference for conjecture over stabilised facts – are available to other poets. . . [only] we have this impression of overall perfection because she can play the music all the way through, while others give renditions full of accidents, repetitions, and drop-outs (Duncan 2002).

Formal disruption and fragmentation are important strategies for any poet wishing to register the threats to the environment aesthetically, and to render the traumatised subject in language. In her 2012 volume, *The Overhaul*, Kathleen Jamie presents two 'fragments', which speak to the provisional nature of human interaction with the natural world. Since the publication of *The Tree House* in 2004, Jamie has investigated ecological issues in taut and lucid poems that seek to distil the complexity of these relations into minutely observed forms. Though Clare Pollard sees in *The Overhaul* a 'strain[ing] for the universal in what is actually only personal', Rachel Falconer makes larger claims for the book, suggesting that in it Jamie moves away

from a concern with the Other and towards an investigation of the interpenetration of being (Falconer 2015, 158). These two critical positions are indicative of the problematic relationship between individual and shared experience, questioning whether the dissolving boundary between self and other is wishful, or instead representative of a heightened spiritual state. While Jamie's knowledge of other species is gleaned from close observation and study of animals and birds, she acknowledges too the uncertainty that attends this symbiosis. 'Fragment 1' suggests that the delicate negotiation between the human and more-than-human world can neither be understood nor transmitted effectively; it can only be imagined and re-imagined. The speaker of the poem is, in Dantean mode, 'adrift in a wood/in wintertime at dusk' (Jamie 2012, 10). She addresses a roe deer bounding away from her through the trees, instinctively fleeing disturbance:

so how can you tell
what form I take?

What form I take
I scarcely know myself
(Jamie 2012, 10)

Eight slow-paced couplets, with alternate lines indented, mark the contemplative movement of the speaking subject through the wood. In order to suggest her circular, reflective thought processes, the poem doubles back on itself – its eighth line repeated, and the image of the deer breaking from the thicket renewed. This is an imagined, rather than a remembered encounter, however, evidence of the primacy of the act of reflection over that of observation.

This text's companion, 'Fragment 2', is shorter by two lines; its contraction suggestive of environmental threat, and time for recovery lost. 'Imagine we could begin/all over again,' the poem opens, and the phrase is renewed in 'begin afresh', 'All over again' (Jamie 2012, 11). In recognising the foretaste of spring in a 'February/dawn light' (11) the speaker imagines a wilderness restored, acknowledging how much has

been lost through human intervention. This imagined wholeness draws attention to the actuality of change: the language of real estate is woven through this contemplation of nature – the 'South/-facing. . . balcony' (11) both hinting at and fragmenting these material values. The sound of splintering wood gives auditory meaning to this destruction but it is outweighed by the cry of the bird whose habitat is being destroyed, these echoing sounds demonstrating the interconnected quality of all interventions in the natural world. The sound travels through space to us but we are slow to hear it – Jamie here implies the necessity for solitary contemplation, a stilling of human speech in order that other sounds may be heard and understood.

The use of the sequence as a means to reflect the dissonance of melancholic thought and the troubled relationship between humans and their environment is evident in a number of works by contemporary women poets. Zoe Skoulding, a writer better known for her anatomisation of urban environments, moves more deeply into the natural world in her sequence 'Through Trees', which records the immersive quality of an individual's engagement with nature. In both her poetry and her critical work, Skoulding engages with embodied forms and the multiple perspectives these yield; this sequence at once challenges unthinking singularity through its repeated forms, and reflects on its own process of making. Typographical effects are used to trace the shape of the tree and to reflect directly on the poems' strategy – the building of words and images 'for/nothing but to/bulk this column/raised in honour/of human futility' ('Through Trees 1', Tarlo 2011, 134). Here the creative act at once transcends and confirms the loss of meaning, suggesting that expression is trapped between a melancholic silence and a later stage of fully realised representation. In this way Skoulding prompts us to think about the provisional nature of all language and the 'ethical trouble' that results from shedding one form of identity in favour of another ('Through Trees 2', Tarlo 2011, 135). The sequence suggests the diverse yet interconnected thoughts that emerge from the repetition in difference of the individual trees and the collectivity they represent.

As in Jamie's poem this space of contemplation allows imagination and observed reality to merge – the uprooted/limbs sunk in/mud roots torn a/gaping mouth of/

underworld ('Through Trees 5', Tarlo 2011, 136). This scene of destruction, suggestive of an entry into hell, facilitates memory and allows the observing subject to access what has been forgotten. Just as a melancholic state may be triggered by recollection of a lost past, so the mood of grief and sadness may enable the experiencing subject to access what has been repressed. This reciprocity of mood and memory is an important dimension of the reflective process and allows these poets to explore the relationship between nature and the observing human consciousness as one that develops and changes over time – not generated in the moment but excavating deep and instinctive responses.

'Through Trees 6' roots its deathly image in poetry, opening with a reference to John Donne's 'The Relic':

bracelet of bright
 about bone yours
 or mine these
 pointless protein
 traces you were
 what you ate &
 high in the holly
 the birds made
 their nests gold
 with clipped hair

(Tarlo 2011, 137)

Evoking the bones of lovers, disinterred and celebrated, Skoulding depicts the merging of bodies in death as a natural process. These 'pointless protein traces' are also protean, always becoming other. Language represents this flux in its texture. The word 'hair', which followed 'bright' in Donne's poem, is displaced a further eight lines, picked up by birds and incorporated into their nests. So Skoulding weaves her contemplative poem from the decomposing parts, the compost of natural

and man-made materials. This preoccupation with death does leave space for the future, however. Just as Donne's poem posits a life through material remembrance, so Skoulding suggests how the melancholic mood may give rise to a heightened awareness of the organic connections between human and environment.

For this younger generation of British poets, ecological issues are an important consideration. Melanie Challenger's *On Extinction* – part travel narrative, part exploration of environmental crisis – signals the importance of creating a space in which to meditate on nature (Challenger 2011). This meditation not only reflects on changing habitats but acts as a warning against complacency, as Challenger indicates in an interview:

We're absolutely capable of restraint and change. I believe our cultures are failing us. I think we need a seismic shift in how we understand human nature and how we design our lives in light of this understanding. We need to be bold and brave (Interview with Melanie Challenger 30).

Challenger's first volume of poems, *Galatea* – completed some five years earlier – traced a symbiotic relationship between woman and nature. This book, in essence a single long poem, does not highlight ecological issues but nonetheless confronts the deathly encounter between body and landscape. The movement between human and natural forms is both an annihilation and resurrection of the self, a crucial melancholic evacuation of singular identity:

But I am not soul in my fantasy,
I am the dead, I am become a tree,
Ignored as trees are, I am that same
Living and barky texture of death,
And the flesh oaths of my nipples
Are the burlesque of living-me

(Challenger 2006, 57)

This vegetative identity takes Skoulding's merging of forms further, to consider lived experience beyond the animate. By progressively linking human and more-

than-human states, Challenger invokes Naess's 'long-range' ecological perspective, and considers the extent to which our relationship to nature evolves both out of, and towards, a philosophical consciousness that exceeds specific historical definition (Naess 1973, 95). Teasing out these boundaries, she contemplates the indistinct nature of organic structures, even as she pays them close scrutiny. Hyphenated words speak to the complexity of these forms, and their capacity to encompass different dimensions. Elsewhere deathliness makes speech impossible: 'Only the dead can be forgiven: But when I/Think of that my tongue's a stone' (Challenger 2016, 19). Where the body is at the centre of experience, 'the limiting powers of memory' are still required to make continued expression possible (19).

Challenger's engagement with the earth, and with geological time, marks the long view of her creative and ecological approach, as well as the solitariness of her creative imagination. 'Stac Pollaidh or *Regret*' reflects on a mountain as embodied form, combining both masculine and feminine traits: 'Virile in the snowlight, she drifts by soft opening' (Challenger in Lumsden 2010, 83). This combination of hardness and softness characterises both the resilience and the malleability of organic form, something Challenger tests aesthetically in her poetry. In spite of the sensuousness of the imagery and the richness of metaphor, there is a dark resistance at the heart of the poem, which exposes the fragility of human life:

Pretty heart-shaped stack, scar of hours on the land,
 By each footfall ingraining springtimes that weren't mine
 But part of another's stroke and echo –
 Now there's little time left for our delight

(Challenger in Lumsden 2010, 83)

The superfluity of human experience to the geological time of the earth sets the melancholy tone of the poem, which is in tension with the vitality of its sexual connotations. Here the potential co-existence of sadness and pleasure is investigated through the combination of fecund and sterile imagery: the sexual energy of virility and consummation, of 'love's vein' and the 'coming on' of hail, is set against

the moonless night, the 'uncreated heart', 'bleached eggs' and 'sterile hearth' (83). Though this poem explores a lasting geological form, its vocabulary reveals the heart of ecological trauma – the fear that we have rendered nature unregenerate at the very moment when we realise its more-than-human power.

The sublime experience of the mountain is captured again in Caitriona O'Reilly's poem 'Blueness'. The vividly sexualised metaphors of Challenger's poem are entirely absent here; instead a cool detachment offers distance from the extremity of this landscape. As so often in O'Reilly's poetry the strangeness of the terrain expresses the acute sense of solitude of the speaking subject. Here the metallic and glacial surfaces dwarf the human perspective suggesting a larger existential realm with which the speaker must come to terms – a realm beyond 'the edge of the sky' (O'Reilly 2001, 29). Blue is of course a melancholy colour, and the visual intensity of the poem charts the duration of observation here: from the contrasts of the opening stanza, the mountain emerges from snow, its dynamics of light and darkness shift and weather patterns mark the seasonal changes.

O'Reilly has written many snow poems – texts in which the natural features of the landscape are removed and surfaces are blank, receptive to the writer's ink. Here she claims links between nature and embodiment: blueness

. . . soaks the heart, fills the papery skin
of infants with vascular colour. This purplish hue
shadowing the hollow of my ribs tells again
how cold and blue I am.

(O'Reilly 2001, 29)

The body is evacuated of its living vibrancy, instead imbued with a deathly pallor. This deprivation hints at the fate of the landscape itself, and by playing with the literalness of this idea, O'Reilly offsets the pathetic fallacy so easily summoned in the representation of the vulnerable woman. Here the speaker is a part of the landscape but this context merely serves to heighten her awareness of her condition of undernourishment, both physically and emotionally. She fails to keep control over

her own state of mind and body, and is exposed by the very scene that might have offered solace.

The intense vantage point of the mountain or cliff is also explored in Abi Curtis's 'Poem at the Edge of a Cliff' – a text in which the female subject imagines the moment when the boundary between earth and sea can be crossed. Liminal spaces are important in the exploration of melancholia: places of extremity foster the heightened feeling and threat to subjectivity. Here they also suggest divergent perspectives and the different interpretations these yield: the woman struggles with her destructive urges though 'up here, on the careful verge, she looks/free enough' (Curtis 2009, 43). She rejects the boundaries between earth and sea – between the space of reflection and the realm of the instincts – even as her conscious mind keeps hold of those distinctions. In spite of her turmoil, she experiences the environment directly, the coolness of the grass touching her skin and reminding her of the sensory present.

At the opening of the poem, feelings of anxiety and challenge are disavowed in favour of the freedom that elevated perspective brings – but instability and elation are always in tension, just as freedom and restriction contend within the sestina mode. The repetition of end-words, which is the key feature of this form, seems to offer a foregone conclusion to the poem as familiar terms are reconfigured. It seems that the subject, once embarked on this journey, cannot draw back, a dynamic suggestive of the now fated character of human interaction with the natural world. It tips the melancholic mood into one of active self-destruction:

She stretches out her arms to grab the standing
air and all the edges freeze as if to look
at her braced body, not yet gone but toppling
through the gull's shed feathers and stockstill
rocks. Thoughts loosen as her brain
is released from all its casings to fill new places.

(Curtis 2009, 44)

The state of in-betweenness is preserved in the continuous present here, in which past and future can be kept in suspension for both the experiencing subject and the reader, before being lost altogether.

These poems suggest the many different ways that melancholy states inflect contemporary poetry by women. In an age of environmental crisis, the nature poem no longer exists to give solace to writer and reader. Instead, the complex co-dependency of human and more-than-human worlds is investigated through both lyric and experimental modes. The estrangement that marks twenty-first century existence is at once contradicted and affirmed by the natural world: it gives space for meditation but reveals the fundamental threat that the environment suffers at human hands. These poems engage both directly and indirectly with landscapes of loss, existing in the space between the death of nature and the life of language.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Collins, L. 2017 'Only the Dead Can Be Forgiven': Contemporary Women Poets and Environmental Melancholia. *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 5(1): 3, pp. 1–21, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.12>

Published: 30 January 2017

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