Water Lives in Words

An Anthology

in connection with the
San Diego State University Common Experience 2013 - 2014: Water
Sponsored by Undergraduate Studies and the Departments of English
and Comparative Literature, American Indian Studies, and
Anthropology

November 2013

Featuring poems by Ofelia Zepeda
Edited by Carly Joy Miller
How to use this anthology

This anthology is designed to be used in connection with the SDSU Common Experience 2013 - 2014 "Water" project and particularly in support of poet Ofelia Zepeda's visit to campus on November.

It includes two sections: first, quotes from The Language of Conservation, a collaborative project between poets and scientists, and second, poems from Professor Ofelia Zepeda, a member of the Tohono O'odham nation of southern Arizona, who writes knowingly about the importance of water in an arid place.

As you read, ask yourself these questions

• What does poetry have to do with water?
• What role can literature play in conservation?
• How do we speak and write about the environments we live in? What impact does this have on our everyday habits?
• What kind of relationship to water is expressed in Professor Zepeda's poems? How does it compare to your own?
• Does reading poems about water impact you differently than reading a scientific study or a newspaper article?

Come meet and hear Professor Zepeda at a brown-bag lunch and reading on November 13. For more information, visit http://commonexperience.sdsu.edu/dus/commonexperience/

Scientists believe that literature can build an important bridge between science and nature. Read more about a collaboration between poets and scientists by going to http://www.poetshouse.org/programs-and-events/poetry-in-the-world/poetry-in-the-zoos
Quotes from *The Language of Conservation*

“The great thing that really distinguishes our species, that we can love and respect about humankind, is not how much smarter than the whales we are (because we may not be smarter than the whales), or how wonderful our language is, because even language is not something unique to us. It is the primacy of the imagination, and our ability to recognize that in the suffering of people dying of AIDS in Africa, or of the whales dying of starvation in the Pacific Ocean, or of any of the species that are being snuffed out, we are not exempt. We are a part of it. That suffering is our suffering. That is our world that they are leaving. Out of that imagination comes, on the one hand, compassion; on the other hand, the arts, and they’re connected to each other. The arts somehow remind us of our kinship with all other life, and with the mortality of other life—the ephemeral, precious nature of every other form of life.”

—W.S. Merwin, United States Poet Laureate, Advisor, Language of Conservation

“Will the extinction of the passenger pigeon and the Tasmanian wolf play out as unfortunate chapters of human history or something more profound, an opening scene to the undermining of the natural systems that support human civilization, perhaps even human life itself? The answer lies in gifting humanity with some truth, not just the clear-eyed objectivity of the past and present, but a deep-rooted consensus on why subjective visions of a perfect world are valid. *Biological accuracy and artistic expression combined communicate in ways neither can alone.*

—Dr. Dan Wharton, Emeritus Senior Vice President Chicago Zoological Society and Director of the Species Protection Program for the Snow Leopard and the Western Lowland Gorilla

“We are a species with language. Language is key to individual thinking and community interaction; and poetry distills the expressive, musical, and emotional strengths of language. Certainly it has surprised some people, indeed some of the partners in this project, that the poetry works…because poetic thinking and metaphor are intrinsic to the way the human mind operates, and are the chief mechanism through which we describe and grasp abstraction.”

—Lee Bricceti, Executive Director of Poets House

“Poetry calls into question what it means to be human; it expands the imagination of a culture and suggests ways to become more humane and more deeply engaged with the world…Combining the expertise of the science and education communities with the deep conversations and relationships Poets House has woven between poets and readers in libraries and other public spaces in the U.S., we were able to collaborate joyously and form animated partnerships between zoological centers and libraries, to respond to the clarion call of those scientists who asked us to help human visitors imagine a sustainable future for all cultures and wildlife on earth.”

—Sandra Alcosser, Professor of English, San Diego State University, Poet-in-Residence, *Language of Conservation*
“It has long been my belief (not original to me, of course) that one of the things poetry can do (not the only thing, of course) is to give voice to the voiceless. Thus, poems that are for and about animals, plants, and the ecosystem within which we live, can serve a very practical purpose. Of course, I also believe that the play of language, the shape a poem makes in the mind of the reader, is a reward in and of itself. But, like traditional American Indian stories, a poem can fill the dual role of both entertainer and teacher.”

—Joseph Bruchac, Poet-in-Residence, 
*Language of Conservation*

“We chose words that might capture a sense of what people feel when they encounter the beauty, mystery, sadness, and complexity of nature.”

—Alison Hawthorne Deming, Professor of English, University of Arizona, Poet-in-Residence, *Language of Conservation*

“Poetry is doing its old work here: returning us to interiority, turning us back inward again…we’re offered a template of the way that human consciousness makes metaphor of other creatures, seeking in them the mirror of our own selves.”

—Mark Doty, Professor of English Rutgers University, Poet-in-Residence, *Language of Conservation*

“We have a vibrant heritage of poetry that has always attempted to touch what matters most to the heart and core of our being, to capture in language the music of our deepest fears and our most energetic pleasures, and to celebrate that which is forever mysterious throughout the wild universe, our home.”

—Pattiann Rogers, Poet-in-Residence, *Language of Conservation*

“The Language of Conservation drew on the skills of poets (led by Montana’s Poet Laureate Sandra Alcosser), librarians, and zoo professionals to explore relationships between human beings and the natural world. The poems in the zoos helped families think about animals and plants in new ways and re-imagine their own role in the broader environment; the programs in the libraries suggested ways that adults and children alike could find more ways to explore poetry, other forms of literature, and science. The Language of Conservation thus linked our fascination with animals and plants with the power of literature, and spurred audiences’ curiosity to learn more.”

—Marsha L. Semmel, Director of Strategic Partnerships, Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
Poems by Ofelia Zepeda
Ocean Power

Words cannot speak your power.
Words cannot speak your beauty.
Grown men with dry fear in their throats
watch the water come closer and closer.
Their driver tells them, “It’s just the ocean,
it won’t get you, watch it, it will roll away again.”

Men who had never seen the ocean
it was hard not to have the fear that sits in the pit of the stomach.
Why did they bring us this way?
Other times we crossed on the desert floor.
That land of hot dry air
where the sky ends at the mountains.
That land that we know.
That land where the ocean has not touched for thousands of years.
We do not belong here,
this place with the sky too endless.
This place with the water too endless.
This place with air too thick and heavy to breathe.
This place with the roll and roar of thunder always playing to your ears.

We are not ready to be here.
We are not prepared in the old way.
We have no medicine.
We have not sat and had our minds walk through the image
of coming to this ocean.
We are not ready.
We have not put our minds to what it is we want to give to the ocean.
We do not have cornmeal, feathers, nor do we have songs and prayers ready.
We have not thought what gift we will ask from the ocean.
Should we ask to be song chasers
Should we ask to be rainmakers
Should we ask to be good runners
or should we ask to be heartbreakers.
No, we are not ready to be here at this ocean.
Pulling Down the Clouds

Ñ-ku’íbadkaj ’ant ’an old g cewagi.
With my harvesting stick I will hook the clouds.
’Ant o ’i-waññ’iño k o ’i-hudiñ g cewagi.
With my harvesting stick I will pull down the clouds.
Ñ-ku’íbadkaj ’ant o ’i-siho g cewagi.
With my harvesting stick I will stir the clouds.

With dreams of distant noise disturbing his sleep,
the smell of dirt, wet, for the first time in what seems like months.
The change in the molecules is sudden,
they enter the nasal cavity.

He contemplates that smell.
What is that smell?
It is rain.

Rain somewhere out in the desert.
Comforted in this knowledge he turns over
and continues his sleep,
dreams of women with harvesting sticks
raised toward the sky.
Traces

Sitting in the desert on a Sunday morning
I make minor observations.
Resting my ankle on the opposite knee
I notice the skin there.
Fine lines running like minor tributaries,
like patterned cuts in a jigsaw puzzle.
The white, dry lines are clear against brown skin.
Flakes begin to peel away
making space for new.
With each movement more flakes fall.
A cycle that is a part of me, and all that claim skin.

I think back and find myself in a swimming pool
where I learned to swim at thirty-five.
I move in the water with reluctant grace.
On a backstroke I see the Space Shuttle
riding back to Florida.
Flakes of my skin in the water cleansed by chlorine.
Pieces of skin now a part of rubble and new cement.

I stand up.
With each step pieces of skin flutter downward,
caught momentarily on the inside of my pant leg.
I continue to walk.
Flakes fall onto the cuff of my sock.
Resting in what must seem like an eternity
for such a migration.

It falls and comes to a longer
rest on top of my shoe. It rides.
It rides the muddy current of the Colorado River,
finding places where the water is clear, green.
Part of me finds its way to
sediment at the bottom of that river.
I will be part of the disturbance
when rocks move again.
Reshaping a canyon.

It rides the water and mud to
the entry point at the ocean.
I move gracefully in weightlessness among ocean life.
My skin floats to the bottom of the floor.
I touch just enough seashells.

I continue walking.
In a dry wash I step on a hill of sand.
The pieces of skin riding on my shoe falls.
At dusk a coyote wanders through the wash.
He picks up my scent.
It leads nowhere.
Proclamation

Cuk Son is a story.
Tucson is a linguistic alternative.
The story is in the many languages
still heard in this place of
Black Mountains.
They are in the echo of lost, forgotten languages
heard here even before the people arrived.

The true story of this place
recalls people walking
deserts all their lives and
continuing today, if only
in their dreams.
The true story is ringing
in their footsteps in a
place so quiet, they can hear
their blood moving
through their veins.
Their stories give shape to the
mountains encircling this place.
Wak is the story of
water memories of this desert.

Citizens gravitate to Sabino Canyon.
The humming, buzzing, clicking of water life,
the miracle of desert streams
on smooth boulders.
Rocks, sediment older than life itself
serve as reminders.
It should be unnecessary for stick notes
to remind us what a desert place is.
A place dependent on rains of summer,
light dusting of snow,
the rarity of dry beds as rebel rivers.
It is real desert people who lift their faces
upward with the first signs of moisture.
They know how to inhale properly.
Recognizing the aroma of creosote in the distance.
Relieved the cycle is beginning again.
There people are to be commended.

It is others who lament the heat of
a June day, simultaneously
finding pride on surviving
the heat—a dry heat.
These individuals should simply
be tolerated.

Opposed to those who move
from one air-conditioned environment
to another, never acknowledging the heat of summer.
Being grateful for November, when
temperatures drop below eighty,
complaining of the lack of seasons in the desert,
heading for mountains
to see colors—
these people—well, what can we say.
We must feel for the dogs of Tucson.
Who bark as if they belong to somebody and
who, before the rain, wish they were a color other than black.
Lost Prayers

Passing below the sacred peak,
here prayers signified by rosary beads are futile.
Calling on the Virgin Mary is useless.

Instead, one must know the language of the land.
One must know the balance of the desert.
One must know how to pray
so that all elements of nature will fall into rhythm.
These are the kinds of prayers that will work.
Once uttered, the sacred mountains respond with coolness,
with gifts of wetness,
with gifts of civility of climate.

Empty plastic bottles are collected
from the desert floor,
replaced with ones filled with water.
In another location blue flags are raised in the desert,
signaling the location of water.
Signaling a chance for survival.
Flags recognizable by heat-demented minds.

The O’odham roamed the desert
with precarious steps.
Keeping an eye on the horizon, moving,
seemingly becoming a part of the heat and dryness
of their landscape.

They walk knowing the heat and aridity of their namesake place.
Never experiencing a mirage of running water,
swaying palms at a cooling oasis.
Never needing plastic bottles, flags to guide them
to water places.
They knew the trails leading to water.
They knew the natural water tanks
always with names like, Hodai Son Wo’o, “Rock Pond.”
These rock ponds later labeled “tinajas” on maps.

Labeled, the rock ponds offer no water sanctuary
for those crossing the desert unprepared.
Ironically, it may have been their distance ancestors
who put these water places on maps.
Instead, in the heat of the desert they rely on rosary beads
and calling on the Virgin Mary.
Kitchen Sink

The light from the kitchen-door window comes through in a special way.
I can see the seasons change in my kitchen sink.
The movement of the sun is shadowed in that sink.
During the afternoon the sink is full with sunlight.
Not necessarily a good time to be washing dishes.
Later in the summer there is a sense of urgency as the shadow gets longer and begins to slant
as the sunlight starts to edge out of the sink.
I pretend the sunlight is going down the drain.
The light cannot be stopped by the plug in the drain.
It seeps down around the inner seal where water cannot go,
becoming a part of the darkness that is always a part of drains and pipes.
Winter is coming,
The air is probably cooler already.
I know this because of my sink.
Moon Games

The moon is full.
The moon and the ocean play their games.
They rush at one another.
At night my daughter and I sleep well,
oblivious to the games going on outside our tent.
Our bodies in comfortable rhythm with the movements of oceans and moons.
Movements of unimaginable quantities of water,
water just outside our tent flap
and waters thousands of miles away.
Ocean waters newly formed, waters thousands of years old.
And lunar pulls that have traveled around a universe unfathomable.
We are lulled to a deeper sleep rocked like babies.
My husband on the other hand is restless.
He turns in his sleep at every thundering crash of wave.
The noise is deafening to him.
The activity wakes him.
In the morning he asks, “Did you hear the ocean last night?”
He says, “I got up and looked at it to see what was wrong.”
Words on Your Tongue

You come here on silver wings.
You gather on a fruit-ripening month.
You come from the river people.
You come from the people of the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.
You come from the people of the tall pine.
You come from the people of the round earth place.
From the four corners of the earth.
You come with the glint of turquoise in your eyes and salt on your tongue.

You come here and see a lost sandhill crane sitting on top of a telephone pole in the desert.
You watch him survey the land for moisture.
Moisture still a long time in coming.
You watch as his attention is momentarily distracted by empty washes and the memory of wetness.
You hear him cry the word for water.

You come here on silver wings.
You come from the people of the towering clans, from people of the desert lands, from ones where rivers cross.
You come from people who are water bearers.

You come with pollen resting on your shoulders and the smoke from cleansing blessings still lingering in your clothes.
Your family blessed you before you traveled.
They had prayers for your safety.
They held out gifts for you, gifts of words, of stories.
You come to us from people with words on their tongue.
About the Poet

Ofelia Zepeda is an honored linguist, language preservationist, and poet. She is a 1999 MacArthur Fellow and Regents Professor of Linguistics at the university of Arizona, where she chaired the Department of American Indian Studies and founded the nationally recognized American Indian Language Development Institute. A member of the Tohono O’odham (formerly Papago) nation of southern Arizona, she grew up in a small cotton farming community and went on to earn her MA and Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Arizona. She authored three books of poems written in English and Tohono O’odham: *Ocean Power: Poems from the Desert*, *Jewed’l-boi/Earth Movements*, *O’Odham Poems*, and *Where Clouds are Formed*. Zepeda also authored the first Papago/Tohono O’odham language textbook, *A Papago Grammar*.

*Water Lives in Words* editor **Carly Joy Miller** is a contributing editor for *Poetry International* and *HINGED: Journal of Converging Arts*. Her work has appeared in *Midwestern Gothic* and *Litonic*. She received a fellowship from the New York Summer Writers Institute, and hosts the Writers’ Collective SDSU MFA series in collaboration with the San Diego Art Institute’s Ray at Night and the San Diego Repertory Theatre. For more bits and blurbs, one should visit her blog, [atonguestip.wordpress.com](http://atonguestip.wordpress.com)