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Alec Follett
and
Madhur Anand

“And it’s just when I think I’ve won the staring contest”: Viewing the World through Science and Poetry with Madhur Anand



Madhur Anand (Photo: Nancy Forde)

On a warm autumn afternoon in Guelph, while the chickadees chirped and the leaves fell, Madhur and I spoke about her collection of poetry, *A New Index for Predicting Catastrophes*, which was recently published by McClelland & Stewart and was a finalist for the 2016 Trillium

Book Award for Poetry. Madhur is a poet, but she is also a renowned ecologist. She runs the Global Ecological Change & Sustainability lab at the University of Guelph and writes widely and regularly on human-impacted ecosystems in Brazil, Canada, China, and India. Given her unique position as an ecologist and a poet, or poet and ecologist, parts of our conversation focused on her research and its influence on her poetry, but our discussion was much broader than that. It moved freely from one topic to the next thanks to Madhur's continual search for beauty and her willingness to be moved by the unforeseen in nature, humanity, and in writing—including her own.

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Alec Follett: We live in an increasingly professionalized society, and although specializations like ecology are important, most people are not experts. This non-specialist majority must, according to the ecocritic Stacy Alaimo, try its best to comprehend and utilize scientific knowledge, especially when addressing environmental concerns (17). Given your expertise as an ecologist who makes extensive use of scientific concepts in your poetry, your poems may have something unique to offer the environmentally engaged non-specialist reader. Here I'm thinking of your found poems, which are created from phrases pulled from your published scientific articles. In order to better understand these poems, your readers may be pushed to develop their understanding of scientific concepts. Even more interesting is that by creating something new out of your previous publications, you are demonstrating that knowledge is always in

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process, even for experts. That knowledge is not fixed, or unattainable, is, I think, a reassuring realization for non-specialist readers, and it may even invite them to create their own interpretations of your poems and put their gleaned scientific understanding to work against environmental injustices. Could you speak to the process you used to generate the found poems and how they relate to your perspective as an ecologist?

Madhur Anand: Well, found poetry is not a new thing. There is a very long history of found poetry and conceptual poetry. To some extent, there is found material almost everywhere in the book and it's not just from scientific writing; it's from newspaper articles, magazines . . . all kinds of media. But what is certainly unique about these found poems that you're talking about is that they come from my own scientific articles, not popular accounts of

science. I don't know too many poets who look to their own primary scientific articles for poems. What I found was that almost invariably, the process of extracting poems from the cool and reserved language of my science (ranging from evolutionary biology, to theoretical ecology, to biodiversity and conservation) led to socio-political poems, ones that I would not have obviously written had I not looked to the language of my articles. There was a sub-text to them and, often, a completely different narrative. I love that about poetry. That way of coming at things perpendicularly.

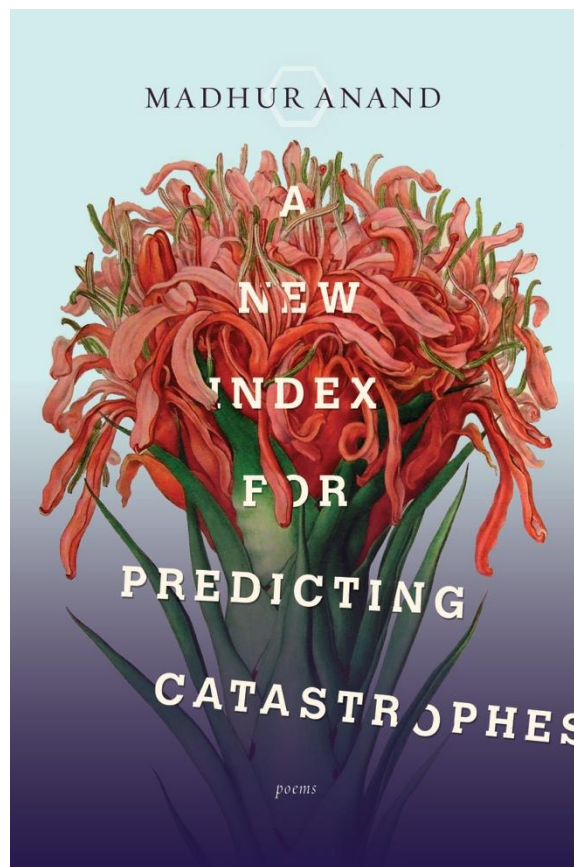
AF: What prompted you to use your published work as material for your poetry?

MA: The idea came to me while I was revising the book, with my editor Dionne Brand, the summer before it would be published. It was a very busy time in my life because I had given birth to my third child in April of that year—so this would have been just a few months after that. I credit the idea, to some extent, to the time I had away from the university on parental leave, almost like a sabbatical though, because I was still leading my research program and supervising graduate students. I also credit all that other stuff about new motherhood and hormones and sleeplessness, and the new love . . . the birth, which is in fact a long process that begins even before conception

and well into a child's infancy for the mother, though we tend to only focus on the labour. It all made me think differently. I sent the first found poem off to Dionne and she loved it and said "more, please." And so I kept on doing it. I wrote 13 of them and to me that felt like enough.

[For continued discussion about Brand and found poetry, click on the audio clip at <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss1/2/>]

AF: In addition to conceptual poets and Brand, who else has influenced your writing? What about Don McKay, for example, who you worked with at Sage Hill Writing Experience?



MA: I don't particularly like this question of influence, because I read so widely, and in fact it's not just poets who have influenced my writing. It's anyone with an appreciation for the poetic ways of life; it can be strangers, family members, friends, scientists, artists, and many non-human organisms and objects. I simply can't name them all. But, here's a small sample of some of the first full books of poetry I loved and how I found them: Wisława Szymborska's *View With a Grain of*

Sand (I was a PhD student and wrote my first poem when she won the Nobel Prize in 1996), Alice Fulton's *Sensual Math* (I was

recommended this book by the late complexity scientist John Holland when I was a postdoc in New Mexico in 1999), David Ferry's *Dwelling Places* (my sculptor roommate in New Mexico had an English degree and read *The New Yorker* cover to cover, religiously. I wrote love poems for him! One of his friends visited from Boston one weekend and extolled the virtues of Ferry.), Robyn Sarah's *Questions About The Stars* (I came across it in Paragraphe bookstore browsing the poetry section in 2001 when I went to give an ecology seminar at McGill), and Adam Dickinson's *Kingdom, Phylum* (I met him at a science and creative writing workshop at the Banff Centre in 2006). That's basically how I choose my reading: It's haphazard. I'm not sure that I seek out particular people. What I like is very diverse and it's certainly not all "nature" poets. I've loved Don McKay's work for a long time, as many others have. I fell in love with his book *Strike/Slip*. I came across it here in Guelph at The Bookshelf in 2007. I know he's known as a nature poet, but if you look at his new encyclopedic *Angular Unconformity* that's just been published, it puts everything into perspective and it gives you a taste of all of his eras, which shows an evolution and quite a diversity in his writing.

AF: And what about Sage Hill?

MA: I saw that Don was doing Sage Hill Writing Experience. So, I thought okay, it's Don, it's Sage Hill, which I had heard great things about, and I carved out the time with the help of many people—mostly my husband. Don is not the type of person, at least with me, to say "oh, this word is not right." We talked mainly about what I was trying to do with my poetry. He was interested at coming at poetry from a scientist's angle, because he's long been

interested in those two things. There just aren't that many poets who also practice science and produce peer-reviewed scientific literature. Don McKay is a scientist, but maybe with a small "s". So, we talked a lot about that, and I found what was missing from my manuscript, which was acknowledging my science and my scientific practice within the poetry. He was giving these brilliantly spontaneous morning "lectures" at Sage Hill. In one of them, he drew a graph where, if I am recalling correctly, the y-axis was labelled "lyric" and the x-axis was labelled "narrative" to describe the landscape of poetry. I took that graph and in my own notebook added a third dimension, a z-axis, which I labelled "science"; he liked that idea. It helped me a lot, actually, because initially I was kind of denying science a little bit, even though it was everywhere. We had some good conversations; he's just so encouraging and inspiring that I came away from it feeling like I was on the right path towards integration. It was those found poems that closed the circle for me.

AF: Some of your poems also consider the awe that is generated when a person is attentive to one's surroundings . . .

MA: Well, there is this unknown, this awe you speak of, that demands acknowledgment. And language is a place where we can explore our individual and human relationship with everything that's out there in the universe. That's one of the ways in which poetry works. You want to somehow make those connections and sometimes they're made by a simple love relationship between two people, but often that's not quite enough. I find even though those types of relationships weave themselves throughout my poetry—I'm

human, I have many relationships—there is always more to it than these one-to-one interactions. Sometimes, the way particles or plants or communities interact are insightful to my brain when trying to describe relationships. So, that’s when you go into those worlds of awe and consider how to navigate them and express perhaps our lack of knowledge of those things or how we can gain insight from what we might have thought were parallel worlds. The poems thus express the human-environment intersections, their feedbacks.

AF: The environmentalist Mitchell Thomashow champions a perspective he calls a naturalist sensibility, which involves approaching one’s surroundings with “wonder, intent, and consideration” (83). I see this mentality in your poem “Wetland” when the speaker says “and it’s just when I think I’ve won the staring contest, / a field of yellow-headed perennials arrives.” In this poem, the speaker looks closely at the wetland, thereby becoming both familiar with the place and amazed by unexpected observations.

MA: Well thanks. It’s beautiful that you read all that in the poem. I’m an ecologist, but I have to say that now most of my time is spent in offices and in front of a computer, and this is the lament, I think, of many people who go on into academia as ecologists, because walking and going into new territory without any *a priori* mission can change your thinking and bring surprising thoughts and perhaps surprising observations.

[For continued discussion about ecological fieldwork, click on the audio clip at <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss1/2/>]

So, this particular poem was written after walks that I would take in wetlands in northern Ontario, where I lived for several years. There’s another poem in there about my many walks over a frozen lake in Sudbury and yet another from repeated walks around my neighbourhood in Guelph.

AF: And I suspect you saw redhead ducks on some of your walks. In “Wetland,” the speaker calls them by their scientific name, *Aythya*, and here, naming seems to be connected to the speaker’s sense of wonder.

MA: I find scientific names beautiful. As you probably know, most of them are Latin words, and they often share roots with English words, so there’s a lot of metaphoric potential in those names. Take my poem “*Betula papyrifera*,” for example. I don’t expect

the reader to know which species that is. It’s fine that it is foreign. It’s fine to approach the world that way; we do it all the time. Sometimes by rendering something completely foreign again (such as calling it by a name we don’t recognize), we allow ourselves to approach it from a different direction and learn something new, create a new relationship. The poem slowly reveals a variety of dimensions of the species—traits, if you will—but not in the normal sense of a field guide. It’s like being exposed to data for which you did not design the experiment yourself, seeing a thing through someone else’s eyes, and yet a not entirely subjective view. For there are elements in the poems

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with which everyone is familiar: phone books, Morse code, etc. (7). In the end, for the poem, it doesn't matter if you come out learning something about paper birch or not.

AF: Your interest in rendering the paper birch foreign certainly resonates with Rudrapriya Rathore, who provides a complimentary reading of your poem in her article “Madhur Anand’s Catastrophic Worlds.” But, your desire to approach things anew also resonates with me. I worked for an environmental NGO for a few summers where I was fortunate enough to learn how to be attentive and open to a place. I became very familiar with the pasture and creek that we studied. My familiarity with this location allowed me to notice and find wonder in new occurrences. It also allowed me to develop new perspectives on routine occurrences. The speaker in “Wetland” seems to have a similar experience. . . I wonder if this naturalist sensibility—that Thomashow finds so important and that I notice in your poems—might be further developed through digital citizen-science initiatives where non-specialists can share observations with scientists?

MA: Yes, to get at some of the larger global problems, we need a lot of data, and there are some types of data for which we need to know individually motivated observations. For example, if we want to know all of the biological responses to climate change, we need to study them everywhere. We need to know: when did the leaves fall on your tree this year, or when did you see the first sighting of this bird? Those phenological responses are quite telling and can have large repercussions. There is only so much that can be gained by doing very concentrated, specific studies on single species at a few sites. Citizen science can be

very important. The North American Breeding Bird Survey in the United States is a very good example of where you can get a blend of naturalists and scientists working together. You have all those local communities and you can build something big around that.

AF: And, sometimes data can be quite artistic. For example, eBird is a massive citizen-science project where birders upload their observations, and this data is used to create migration maps. Watching the maps of the birds moving back and forth across the Americas is quite beautiful, but sometimes data seems less beautiful to me. In your poem “*Otros Pájaros*,” the speaker is looking at bird specimens that are unique and colourful, but they are also dead and labelled. Similarly, “The Chipping and the Tree” seems to critique bird guides for idealizing birds, for making them static. Having spent a lot of time in the field, I really appreciate guide books, but they don’t capture a bird in its entirety: the way it looks in certain light, or the myriad ways it interacts with its surroundings.

MA: Yes . . . well I should say it’s not a critique of the guides. The guides are brilliant. I love field guides. It would be wrong, however, to think that they represent our full and complete knowledge of species because you usually get one or two pages per bird. How are you going to tell all of its ecological (not to mention human-related) stories in such limited space? And that’s something that is purposefully missing from the guides, because it’s all about identifying a species through characteristics that are easily visualized and relatively universal and static, like the plumage and the shape and size of the beak. Identification is important and an enlightening process in

and of itself, because it involves pattern recognition and close observation (always much harder than I think it's going to be). Then, there is always a little paragraph about habitat or a map of the distribution, so their ecological interactions certainly play a role there. Similar things can be said for museum collections; we absolutely need those collections. We have learned a lot through herbaria and the zoological collections, and they're beautiful. What I am suggesting, throughout all of my work, is how to bring scientific knowledge, entities, concepts, and language into connection with what we traditionally think of as non-scientific.

AF: Well, one way that you connect the scientific and non-scientific is through your appreciation of diversity. The guides and collections celebrate biodiversity, in their own ways, but you also value other forms of diversity. For example, you've told me that you speak a few languages and that each language allows you to articulate yourself in a different way. Also, in your poem "Parle-G," you lament the loss of biodiversity, as well as the loss of specific ways of knowing. In this poem, the speaker is at market with her mother, who is picking the leaves off of an orange loquat, and this prompts the speaker to think about her great-grandparents who "grew species of plums and apricots I've never seen" (40). Here, some knowledge about markets and fruits is passed down through the generations, but a lot of knowledge is not, and this is troubling.

MA: All your observations and comments are wonderful. I've often found the questions and the comments in interviews

so enlightening to the processes and to the poems that I feel like they're almost more important than my answers. I am concerned with loss of diversity of all kinds: this desperate attempt to hold onto the things that are linking us and can carry us to those things, if nothing else to acknowledge them. It's me in the poem, so my mother is the metaphor, literally carrying me over to her past . . . you know, because metaphor means "to ferry across." We almost require those metaphors, those things that can carry us over to another time and another place where things were different and in some ways richer and in some ways not as rich. So, to link these very disparate places . . . this orange loquat that is so isolated in many ways from its

ancestors. I'm quite terrified, personally, about losing my cultural heritage. That's just the way things go—life is loss—but at the same time, there are things that you're going to do to enrich it as well, so it's a balancing of those forces. I think that is the concern of all immigrants and descendants of immigrants: how to reconcile the gains with the losses, particularly when it relates to language and biodiversity.

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