

“Walking in the Field of Words” was a workshop presented at the University of Iowa’s Summer Writing Festival in July, 2019. What I came away from the workshop with was the reinforcement that nature can come in many incarnations in poems, from the solace of nature and the simplicity of birds that an elderly man may feel in a poem by Mona Van Duyn to the glory of catching an old fish and letting him go in a poem by Elizabeth Bishop. I read a poem of mine at the workshop and would like to expand upon the way that I am using nature in the poem and, by extension, how any poem with nature may reach out toward the universal. My poem is entitled “Alaska, Again” and reads:

Mountain goats forage on the

Steep sides

Moving up and down so easily

What keeps them from falling

Into the water as blue as

The icebergs

Sea Lions in coats of suede

Roll around and bellow

That they rule their space of rock and earth

While mew gulls

With their lovely round heads

And gentle agate eyes

Fight at the harbor

With ravens over fish scraps

Can you imagine the mountain goats

At the bottom of the sound

If they could only get used

To the taste of the water

They could feed on the seaweed and krill

And float from whale to whale

If I could only feel in

The knife sharp days

And the nights that never end

As fine as I do this time in May

So near the Arctic

I would wish to never leave

Land of spaces and creatures

Fresh world so seldom touched

You open your hand to me once

A spin of the cosmos

I open my eyes

Never to be closed to you

Near-Polar cousins

Mountain and Dall's porpoise

I will never let you go

I chose to begin the poem with images of real living things that I had seen in Alaska. First, the mountain goats and then on to the sea lions and the mew gulls and ravens at the harbor. What is going to attract the attention of the reader in a poem? It is the specific, the thing, the object which they have seen in their lives or have seen in similar objects. Nature also gives us more than just object in its living creatures and plants. Mountain goats in my poem "forage," they are active, they are alive, and they give the reader a picture of a slice of life that they may not have seen but know enough of to be able to imagine. What better way to engage the reader into literature than by connecting him or her to the living, since we too take part in that living world? Who cannot feel the importance of an eagle, a bear, or even connect to the plant world when a fir or a daffodil appears in a poem?

I then moved in the poem to a reverie of the mountain goats living at the bottom of the water or the sound and what such a transformation would have meant for these animals. They would have to get used to salt water, they would have to eat seaweed and krill, and perhaps, they would be floating from place to place in the sea, and live among the whales. I then moved the poem to a meditation on how

dark and long the winter nights can be, and as we all know, in the Arctic, the nights may not end. But the poem takes place in May so there is the opportunity to see the natural world, to experience it in the full light of day. The speaker at this time in May wishes to never leave this spot, this place of connection with the world, this ground upon which the personal becomes a part of the universal.

I chose to end the poem addressing the land and its citizens and saying that I would “never let [them] go.” Nature is a vast topic in poetry, and in the world of modern and contemporary poetry in America and England, poets from Richard Wilbur to Robert Frost to Gary Snyder have sounded its depths. It is a universal subject, a part of everyone’s life, the source from which life springs, and, I believe, an unending subject for the poem.