

A Reader's Companion

to *Forage* by Rose McLarney



“ Rose McLarney has won attention as a poet of impressive insight and craft; her third collection, *Forage*, offers considerations of the natural world and humans' place within it in ecopoetry of both ambitious reach and elegant refinement. At the confluence of these intricately sequenced poems is a social commentary that goes beyond lamenting environmental degradation and disaster to record--and augment--the beauty of the world in which we live.”

Introduction

This companion to *Forage* offers questions for group discussion and individual readers who want to consider poems closely, writing prompts for fellow poets, reviews, and links for further information.

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Ecopoetry and Poetry of Place

Conversation Starters

- *Forage* has been described as a book of [ecopoetry](#). It's also place-based. What are some of the different places, regions, or environments evoked by the poems?
- What are some of the particular concerns about these places that the poems raise?

My Comments

I'm known as an Appalachian poet, and the mountains of Southern Appalachia are indeed where I—and much of the material for my poetry—come from. There are several poems in *Forage* that revisit a past set in the mountains such as **“In A Dry County”** (pg. 21), **“Before the First Bell”** (pg. 24), **“Who Stays”** (pg. 25), and **“Return Visit”** (pg. 26). Several of these poems remark on loyalties and changes to the place, and some mourn people and possibilities lost by leaving and to time and other powers, such as **“After Hearing of His Passing”** (pg. 14).

That said, though my origins are in the mountain South, as an adult, I have moved around the country and, as I have done so, I have wanted my writing to include and explore every location I have had the chance to know. So there are some poems set in the prairie (or former prairie, before it was destroyed) and urban environments, which draw on the brief time that I lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma: **“Fine Dust”** (pg. 30), **“Abundance”** (pg. 48), **“Full Capacity”** (pg. 49), **“The Rind Remains”** (pg. 51), **“Hereafter”** (pg.55), and others. These poems take pleasures in cities, museums, architecture, and other human achievements, while being aware of overconsumption and, in particular, the water that should underlie and run through everything on our earth, but is depleted.

There are more poems set in the deep South, prompted by my experiences living in Alabama and trying to appreciate the region's culture and environment, as well as to come to terms with an obvious history of racism. (While the mountain South is in no way free from the economy of and responsibility for enslavement, evidence of the practice is not so immediately visible. In the deep South, sights such as plantation mansions surrounded by the wrecks of former cotton fields and Civil Rights movement historical sites have forced me to confront horrors of the past.) The poems of the deep South include **“Poem With a Slur and a Pun In It”** (pg. 12), **“Peach Juice”** (pg. 22), **“A Participation of Waters”** (pg. 23), **“Accrual”** (pg. 35), and **“Seasonal”** (pg. 56), to name a few.

Climate change and heat, as well as water and dryness, play into the poems at various levels: as literal concerns with drought, irrigation, utilities, and drinking water; larger considerations of rivers and streams and watersheds' connections; and allusions to human desires and indulgences such as alcohol. I grew up in a county that was *dry* in the sense that it was not legal to sell alcohol, but that was, in terms of its ecosystem, a temperate rainforest. The rich tributaries made me aware of how they come together and affect each other. Such early influences shaped my approach to learning about my new home in the deep South, as seen in the poems' views of the Mississippi River, into which so many of the country's streams flow, that was used in the slave trade in the past and collects and conveys pollutants in the present.

Ideas for Writing

Take a set amount of time—I suggest at least 10 minutes—to write down notes about the place where you grew up.

Take the same amount of time and use it to write about a location you have only visited once, or that you may travel to in the future.

Reduce—or build up—each of these sets of notes into a poem draft of the same length. I'm sure you can manage 9 (8 and a half, really) lines like **“Who Stays”** (pg. 25). How about 35 dense lines like **“Seasonal”** (pg. 57)? Whatever lengths you try, draft equally as many lines about the familiar and exotic locale, practicing compression and expansion.

Next, try to equalize the poems' strengths. Does the poem about your hometown have as much sense of curiosity as the poem about the strange destination? Have you even seen the sights that draw outsiders to your hometown? Is there something mundane (such as the lawn ornament in “Seasonal”) you can re-see with more amazement? (Or, can you describe it in a more elevated tone like I manage for just the few first and final lines of “Seasonal”)?

Is your draft poem about the distant location knowledgeable and believable? How do you think the full-time residents feel about serving the tourists? Is there something that attracts visitors but that has a problematic underside (such as football culture that includes, not just the stars playing in stadiums, but all the boys who don't ever make it big)?

Influences and Sources

Conversation Starters

- Many of my poems spring, not just from sources in the earth, but sources in the sense of references and research. Paging through *Forage*, list references—such as quotations from other texts—you can find.
- Next, reconsider what you're counting as a reference. Are you thinking like you're writing an academic paper with citations? If you broaden your concept of sources, what other fonts of poetic material can you find in the book and add to the list?

My Comments

An attentive reader may notice that both the brief front and back pieces (“**What Need Have I for Loftier Song to Sing**” on pg. 1 and “**With The Georgics’ Last Word**” on pg. 67) in *Forage* allude to Virgil. While I don’t generally want my readers to have to work through numerous references to comprehend my poems, I did want to acknowledge that praising the pastoral and expressing fear of its fading, as *Forage*’s poems do, is nothing new. Or, rather, that the ecopoetry I am writing is part of a long tradition, though the fears have become more urgent today. I also reference canonical texts in “**Winter Hard**” (pg. 8) and “**Little Monster, Masterpiece**” (pg.60)—*Kaputt* by Curzio Malaparte and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, respectively. Yet, I’ll admit “Winter Hard” is equally as indebted to a Radiolab podcast I happened to hear, which mentioned and is the only reason I remembered *Kaputt*, as it is to the novel. “Little Monster, Masterpiece” combines Mary Shelley’s interpretations of climate in 1816, the “Year Without a Summer,” and the pregnant body with phrases from weather reports I heard and sights on a neighborhood playground I happened to see the recent summer when I was writing this piece.

Many of the poems in *Forage* work with ideas from biology, history, and visual art. I have no training in any of these fields, but allow myself to creatively interpret information from them if I can make it ring true (and perhaps resonate more deeply than pure fact) with readers. I wrote “**Fine Dust**” (pg. 30) and “**What Survives**” (pg. 33) after intentionally researching Oklahoma’s Dust Bowl and native species of Alabama as a part of my attempts to feel at home in these states. But I encountered the photos described in “**Motionless**” (pg. 34) of Civil War battlefields in a museum in New England that I visited for the purpose of seeing an entirely different exhibit. I also utilize unofficial sources such as language I overhear spoken by strangers, read on signs, find in outdated reference books, or collect from the day’s online browsing.

“**Fresh Tracks**” (pg. 64) quotes a newspaper headline and is an homage to Philip Levine’s [“They Feed They Lion](#).” My poem is influenced by his syntax, as seen in the similar beginnings of my sentences. Also, my poem’s voice speaks of the coywolf less like the underdog it might appear to be and more like a future victor. This element takes its cue from how “They Feed They Lion,” in its

representation of the oppressed, focuses not on particular examples and arguments, as many social commentaries do, but capturing a resilient, defiant, collective speech.

Ideas for Writing

Collect a piece of language that interests you by listening to passersby, reading a book on a subject you've never studied before, going to a museum and paying attention to the exhibit plates, mining advertisements for phrases with greater implications, or however you can.

Choose a free verse poem you admire and make a template of its form. Count its lines and number a piece of paper or document of your own with that many lines. Note the stanza breaks or line lengths with marks in your document. Copy a few of the model's key or repeated phrases onto your lines, leaving the rest blank. Fill the blanks, starting by incorporating the piece of found language. Then try to fill in the rest in your own unique way.

To draft a distinctive poem, focus on either A) a different subject presented in a form or syntax like your model's, or B) the same subject from a completely different point of view (such as that of a person who thinks wolves, and any creatures related to them, should be exterminated).

Tone and Diction

Conversation Starters

- A number of the poems in *Forage* pose questions. Identify several. Do they provide answers to their own questions? If not, what *do* they offer?
- Are there poems in which you feel the speaker sounds uncertain, or as if she is making an argument she doesn't fully believe? Which ones? Why would a poet choose not to revise away equivocal qualities of the voice?

My Comments

I don't suppose I am all-knowing, so I don't write in an omniscient voice. I am more interested in curiosity and honesty than expertise or certainty. My hope is that the poems, by being open, can engage readers and invite them to wonder along with me.

“One Way of Posing” (pg. 6), near the beginning of *Forage*, sets out an intention: not to reduce animals to symbols for humans. But, a “But” comes into the poem after four stanzas and is the hinge for its contradictions and counterpoints. For the four stanzas on the other side of that “But,” the poem admits ways in which this goal is not achieved. Dedicated readers may be interested in comparing this poem to “Facing North,” which begins my previous collection, *Its Day Being Gone*, and is [available online from Waxwing](#). In “Facing North,” I struggle with similar concerns about making animals into bearers of our burdens of meaning and symbolic scapegoats illustrating humans' darker feelings. One could say that, if I start out two books with a goal I then admit I fail to reach, I'm making no progress. But I believe the style and imagery of the poems is different enough that I am covering new ground in other senses, and that the poems' admissions of basic truths may be worth more to the reader than novelty.

In **“Winter Hard”** (pg. 8), diction shifts and the poem interrupts itself. “Which makes no sense” butts in in stanza 5. Then a sentence fragment dismisses that interruption with “never mind.” The next stanza starts with “Snap,” which is auditorily jarring and intended to draw the reader out of their own head and back to the story being told. But the poem no longer feels firm or includes phrases such as “of course” after this point. Instead, sentences begin with “could be” and “something.”

“Pastoral” (pg. 29) tentatively structures its sentences around “could” too, as well as posing different possibilities with “or,” “perhaps,” and “though.” This poem is in the voice of someone trying to persuade herself to put an appreciative spin on the scenery before her—without entirely succeeding.

Several other poems strive to be optimistic—such as **“What Survives”** (pg. 33)—but I hope you can hear the voice faltering in them, and know that I cannot really be in denial about and comfortable with the issues raised. “What Survives” doesn't directly address racism, but the words “color,” “diversity,” and “bias” should imply that this is the subject the speaker is skirting. Poems

such as **“And Still I Want to Bring Life Into This World”** (pg. 19), **“Accrual”** (pg. 35), and **“Preservation”** (pg. 36) also try to make the best of the situation and, in doing so, encourage the reader to reexamine when our actions are redeeming and when we may be too ready to compromise.

“Poem with a Slur and a Pun It” (pg. 12) is phrased as a praise poem, but I chose to start it with the bossy, instructional word “should” and later revised it to begin “A man” to help the reader deduce that it the speaker expresses ideas which are not agreeable to me, Rose. Meanwhile, **“Many Kinds Make the Crowd”** (pg. 13) and **“After Hearing of His Passing”** (pg. 14) are among the poems that implicate the self—my own shortcomings in personal relationships and so many individuals’ potential to get swept up in social injustice and mob mentality. While these poems aren’t comfortable to read or write, they are efforts at being aware, which I regard as my job as a poet, whether I’m observing troubling events or the details of a flower.

Ideas for Writing

Draft a poem addressing an issue you feel strongly about. Read it over and ask yourself if you would be persuaded by the speaker.

Chances are, you’ve already heard that you should *show not tell*. But if the piece sounds more like an editorial or a rant than a piece of art, you can get the most out of this adage by methodically going through the draft and marking abstract assertions and statements of meaning. Then, replace each with a bit of narrative or image relevant to the issue. To revise further, here are some more ideas:

If there are lines in which the voice is too preachy to be compelling, try adding questions or pauses (shown with punctuation and white space) or rhetorical uncertainties (such as “maybe” and “or”)—moments that let the reader insert their own thoughts.

If the language itself isn’t very interesting, redraft the poem in the voice of someone who does not share your beliefs. You’ll probably find some fresh vocabulary and unexpected syntax. (And maybe some empathy.) And, if you feel the poem must support your original beliefs, you can incorporate elements that reveal flaws in the speaker’s thinking or their doubts.

Pattern and Form

Conversation Starters

- Most of my poems aren't formal in a traditional sense. However, I do put thought into patterns and appearance on the page. Look over *Forage*, paying attention to the number of lines or other aspects of the shapes of the poems. Choose a few poems that catch your eye and think about how the visual characteristics relate to each piece's verbal content.
- If there are couplets or tercets, do you think the poem was divided up just to create a tidy look and an even number of lines, or can you find examples of when the enjambments emphasize important sounds or words?

My Comments

I love line breaks and stanzas and their power to pair and separate words and ideas. And, while I don't adhere to many named forms such as sonnets (that are rhymed or metered, at least) or sestinas or villanelles, determining lineation is a major part of my process. As I try to find the use of space best suited to the poem's tone and meaning, cut lines down to extend them to similar or intentionally contrasting lengths, or craft poignant enjambments, I must revisit each word choice and often discover ideas for revising larger aspects of the poem. Here are some details about the formal choices I made in *Forage*.

“Admiring Audubon’s Carolina Parakeets” (pg. 11) and **“Make Something Out of It”** (pg. 62) are both ekphrastic poems--about pieces of visual art. (Follow these links to view [Carolina Parakeets](#) and [“Pig on Expressway”](#).) But, at a glance, the poems are not much alike.

In the first, I strictly enforced a concept for the line count, with each stanza containing one more line than the last as the weight of the message increases. The breaks emphasize alliteration (see the Ys, Fs, Bs, and Hs in stanza 1) and the parallel structures of the sentences (see “which” and “none” in stanza 2). This controlled form seemed appropriate for Audubon’s precise images which, as **“One Way of Posing”** (pg. 6) reminds us earlier in the book, used stuffed and still models and appear crammed into the bounds of the paper.

“Make Something Out of It” is the book’s only prose poem. It’s about the fantastical, spiritual art of Nellie Mae Roe and is composed in an imperative voice that moves away from the first person speaker’s style towards, perhaps, that of one of Roe’s creatures providing guidance. A prose poem, unassuming and free from restrictive expectations like Roe’s folk art, felt like the right form in which to make “Make Something of It.”

A number of poems use couplet or tercets, but—if a poem suggests loneliness or some other lack—stop short at the end to leave one line orphaned in the final stanza. **“Pet”** (pg. 10) is the first example of this strategy in *Forage*.

“After the Removal of 30 Types of Plants and Animals for the Junior Dictionary” (pg. 5) was shaped not as much by patterns of lines (which are fairly simple couplets) as patterns within the

language. I always aim to craft musical language through internal rhymes, assonance, and, in the case of this poem, alliteration, which begins with “Blackberry blanked” and “language” and “less” in the first stanza. “After the Removal...” contains an additional structural element: The words removed from the dictionary are used in the first three stanzas moving forward in alphabetical order (A for *acorn* and *arousal* through C for *cygnet* and *childhood*). The later three stanzas get stuck on their M and L words, listing in reverse alphabetical order from *mother* to *magpie* and from *lobster* to *last*, but then buck that pattern to move forward again to *live* for the conclusion.

Ideas for Writing

Reformat a draft of a poem that you aren’t satisfied with as a block of text with no line breaks or punctuation or capital letters. Give the text block to a friend and ask them to mark where they would punctuate and break the lines.

As you assess each suggestion, you may get the sense that your friend is not perceiving what you intended for the piece, and this may lead you to revise far more than the lineation. Your close revisiting of lines may also point you to parts of the language that can be cut that you hadn’t been aware of before. Or, the activity may show you where you can add more words, which wouldn’t have fit in your previous constraints, if you alter the form.

This exercise can work without the help of a friend as well. Reformat your poem as a prose block and set it aside for at least a day (or, even better, a month or more). Then go back to it and mark where breaks should be. Or, read your poem aloud and mark where you pause or emphasize sounds as points where lines and stanzas should end.

Sequencing of the Collection

Conversation Starters

- What do you notice about the sections in *Forage*? Why do you think the poems that share a section are grouped together?
- Do you note comparisons or contrasts between first and last poem within each section? How about between the last poem of a section and the first poem of one that follows?
- Can you find poems that use similar images or ideas throughout the book? Is a poet just repeating themselves and running out of material when they write poems with similarities, or do such poems have another effect?
- Why might a poet choose to put the space of many pages between some related poems, yet put other related pieces side by side in a manuscript?

My Comments

There are eight poems in each section and I arranged them to be in conversation with or, in some cases, complicate each other. For instance, because this book is a kind of environmental elegy, it begins with “after”—as the opening word of both the first and last title in section 1 **“After the Removal of 30 Types of Plants and Animals from the Junior Dictionary”** and **“After Hearing of His Passing”**). The second section begins and ends with poems that reference the ark (**“And Still I Want to Bring Life into This World”** and **“Return Visit”**), but do not reach the same conclusions, with the latter trying to strike a more positive tone.

A number of other poems call out to and echo each other across the pages and approach a concept from more than one angle. For instance, **“First in Right”** and **“In a Dry County”** (pg. 20 and 21) are placed on adjoining pages, share the form of quatrains, and end with words that could be mistaken for each other: “dues” and “dew.” But these homonyms have their own meanings, of course, as do the poems. The first is more public and set in the problematic present, while the second is personal and set in a romantically remembered past.

“Motionless” (pg. 34) and **“On the Move”** (pg. 63) appear almost 30 pages apart and contain feelings about nostalgia and looking forward that are as conflicted as their titles. Writing sets of poems such as these frees me from the notion that I might be able to make the definitive pronouncement on a subject or cover a topic completely in the space of just one poem.

Ideas for Writing

Try arranging drafts of your own poems in a sequence. You don’t need to have enough poems to fill an entire book to benefit from this. (Think about creating a chapbook of 20 pages or micro-chapbook of 10 pages, perhaps.) As you place the pieces, do you notice similarities between your poems?

Are there words or ideas you're relying on too often that you need to revise? Or are some of the poems you thought might be redundant actually companion pieces that illuminate various aspects of their theme?

Is there content you could revisit in additional poems? Think about creating a more complete sequence or manuscript in the future, try to envision the poems that would fit between the work you have already written, and let that inspire you to begin new drafts.

And a Few Concluding Notes--

I started out by discussing *Forage* as ecopoetry, but, of course, labels can't capture everything. And I wasn't able to devote my mind to the environment alone as I wrote this book. I grapple with how I contribute to the exploitation of the earth. But I am also concerned what has been given and taken in my intimate relationships with the individual people dear to me, and what art, understanding, and beauty I may contribute to the world—and hope to share with readers such as you.

Critical Commentaries

About *Forage*, from Poets I Admire

"In *Forage*, Rose McLarney speaks to the interiority that hums inside us as we engage the natural world, which 'speaks of us,' as we 'praise parks, what's left of wilderness, and the literature of the diaspora.' It's all here, and it's all alive with every line -- these poems stun me with their keen eye and their honest telling of what they view. It's refreshing to find this much courage on the page, at a time when we need it the most."

- **Van Jordan**

"McLarney's book is a call to prayer--or to arms--making itself a guardian of the diminishing natural world, in poems of fierce, edgy charm, of despair and forgetting. Beauty, that lives here too."

- **Marianne Boruch**

"*Forage* is indeed a book about gleaning nourishment from the bizarrely precarious world we have made. These poems in their gorgeous imagistic clarity deepen the story of life and ask of us, as the poet asks of herself, 'to whom/ have I made reverence truly known?' And what does the poet revere? The word, the wounded land, the wile of the wild, the shade of trees. An earthly constellation."

- **Alison Hawthorne Deming**

"Reckoning with the most pressing questions regarding abundance and waste, the human capacity for love and corruption, and the raw possibilities of our future, McLarney asks, 'Must the answer be only the variety / of grief?' Given the lateness of things, perhaps so. On the other hand, the work in *Forage* is also the work of refusal, bringing fierce lament and complex song to the direness of our present."

-**Rick Barot**

Reviews

Publisher's Weekly

"Readers will revel in the book's undeniable beauty and smarts."

The Millions

"McLarney has been a gifted storyteller since her first book...but I dare say that she's getting even better, more hypnotic. She's one of our finest poets of the wild...A gorgeous book."

Blue Stem

"I think, for now anyway, the momentum of southern poetry is with female poets: Ellen Bryant Voigt, Natasha Trethewey, the late Claudia Emerson, and now, perhaps, Rose McLarney."

The Rumpus

"The stern, stoic persona and voice she crafts is so tragically appealing, we want to keep getting

stomach-punched...In these moments, McLarney's grim lyricism keeps us rapt, agog, and sometimes frightened. She writes uncompromising, honest poems that sound like no one else..."

[Glint Journal](#)

"Ultimately, what is foraged is faith in words, in their capacity for serving as glimmers amid existential darkness, as charms against loss, disappointment, annihilation."

[Kenyon Review](#)

"...to observe the world before you so as to discover a sweetness and a necessity you might otherwise overlook—is at the core of McLarney's eco-poetic project in *Forage*...To read through *Forage* is to experience an interconnected poetry collection about interconnectivity."

[The Millions](#)

"One of the finest mythmakers in contemporary Appalachian letters is Rose McLarney."

[Appalachian Journal](#)

"McLarney is an Appalachian Robert Frost. "

[The Iowa Review](#)

"Solemnity in poetry requires caution: nothing is worse than verse dripping with self-significance. McLarney, thankfully, is exactly the poet to handle such material... McLarney's poems are such gifts."

[RHINO](#)

"...the poet finds ways to sing of what's left or broken or only in parts."

[The Los Angeles Review](#)

"McLarney's eye and ear are dead-on. The result is a stubbornly-rooted first collection of impressive insight and craft."

[The Los Angeles Review: "An Aesthetics of Earliness"](#)

"*The Always Broken Plates of Mountains* is a book where time is slow, and this slow time is also a deeply social as well as a psychic time...McLarney plumbs the depths."

[Blackbird](#)

"Skillfully embedded with figurative language, McLarney's work rewards close reading...Intense and unsentimental, these carefully wrought poems show both sophistication and economy."

[Publisher's Weekly](#)

"Her lines are steeped in memory, loss, love, and the immediate textures of her natural environment."

[Orion](#)

"The poems in *Its Day Being Gone* are devoted to emotional, physical, and historical connection with

the land and with others, past and present. In these links, this rootedness, is where we find our hope."

[*The Smoky Mountain News*](#)

"Her work poems have the pith, the profundity, the probing of Berry's, and yet she is very much her own muse, making a new poetry..."

Interviews

[*New England Review*](#)

[*The Adroit Journal*](#)

[*Appalachian State University News*](#)

[*American Literary Review*](#)

[*A Poetry Congeries with John Hoppenhaler*](#)

[*Orion*](#)

[*The Collagist*](#)

[*Mountain Talk \(audio\)*](#)

About the Author

My collections of poems are *Forage* and *Its Day Being Gone*, both from Penguin Poets, as well as *The Always Broken Plates of Mountains*, published by Four Way Books. I am co-editor of *A Literary Field Guide to Southern Appalachia*, from University of Georgia Press, and the journal *Southern Humanities Review*. I have been awarded fellowships by MacDowell and Bread Loaf and Sewanee Writers' Conferences; served as Dartmouth Poet in Residence at the Frost Place; and won the National Poetry Series, the Chaffin Award for Achievement in Appalachian Writing, and the Fellowship of Southern Writers' New Writing Award for Poetry, among other prizes. My work has appeared in publications including *The Kenyon Review*, *The Southern Review*, *New England Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Missouri Review*, and *The Oxford American*. Currently, I am Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Auburn University. My fourth book is forthcoming from Penguin in 2024.



photo by Nicole McConville

Class Visits and Events

If *Forage* is an assigned text for your course or group, I'd be happy to visit via Zoom free of charge, in most cases. And if you'd like to set up an in-person visit, reading, workshop, or other interaction, [let me know](#).

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rosemclarney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

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