Dreams of the Tropics: a collection of ecopoems by Karim S. Lachheb

Note from the Ecolinguistics Association. In addition to ecolinguistics articles, the *Language and Ecology* journal publishes outstanding poems which use language in creative ways to address ecological issues. We are delighted that Karim S. Lachheb has published this collection of poems in the journal and would like to express our gratitude to him. We would encourage readers to respond to these works with ecolinguistic analyses that investigate the power of the poems to make a difference. Please send responses to convenor@ecoling.net. In addition to these poems, Karim S. Lachheb has shared some of his inspiring paintings, which are available from www.ecoling.net/visual

Introduction from the author: I am Karim S. Lachheb, a Moroccan-born American independent visual artist, poet engagé and storyteller. I grew up in Meknès, Morocco and am currently living as a nomad in Hawaii, where, disillusioned, bankrupt, homeless, and in the third act of my life, I sought refuge 10 years ago. Before this I was completely ostracized and suffered extreme prejudice and serious threats on my life, in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy that took place before my own eyes in New York city, where I lived for 25 years until that ominous day that radically changed my life forever, and confiscated a few dreams I had been nourishing for many years.

In 1981 after having graduated from the École des Beaux Arts in Tétouan, Morocco, to my great surprise, I was awarded a full American scholarship to pursue my higher education at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, where I earned my BFA as well as a Masters Degree in Art Education from the Barney School of Education at New York University. I consider myself mostly self-taught or autodidact.

All throughout, being passionate about words and images since childhood, I have accumulated a considerable body of work with a wide range of styles, combining both the visual and the verbal in my daily routine as an artist, writing in four languages, which I find to be very compelling and a great source of gratification, as well as a tool for survival beyond borders, bereavement, and diaspora; having to exist between two completely different world cultures, and attempting the impossible to reconcile, if not transcend the monumental gap that separates the two.

The few poems and paintings I am including here are meditations which reflect my personal experience vis a vis the tropical, rain soaked, and the ever changing environment of the Polynesian islands of Hawaii, where I sought refuge away from mainland America in particular, and the wide-world in general. Epic rain is what I entitle the haiku, as you may well see, they are rain-soaked poems, which is no wonder, since the Hawaiian Islands are perhaps some of the wettest islands in the world.

As an artist and a human being however, it is not only imperative, but a sacred duty for me to protest against the evil of permanent war and environmental degradation inexorably imposed on our beautiful planet and the rest of humanity, purely exclusively for selfish, corporate greed.

Tropical Dreams

"Civilization is what makes you sick!"

Paul Gauguin

When the night's strings are pulled again the great Polynesian island is aflame with sounds: The ocean's orchestra entertains the ashen lava rocks above, where the landscape is of lunar character and of petrified, ancient giants that once walked out of the sea to become terrestrial beings of vast, untold proportions and songs; the intrusive frogs raving, hysterical, in the deep throat of many an epic, rainy night.

They seem frozen in some angry, unachieved gestures, those rocks! A jagged, ecstatic dance forged by molten lava gently rising, yellow, blue, blood- red, liquid fire to the distant cathedrals of the most immense skies I have ever seen, incessantly sculpting life as it softly sleeps in the viscous music of its deeply shouting, eternal silences. Dreaming emerald green, tropical dreams.

The imperturbable void cushions the giant, rocky limbs as they daringly stretch out for space clashing violently with yet, more space and other limbs: There is nothing but space as far as an eagle's eye can reach.

Other invisible presences mysteriously dwell in the recesses of the eerie, lonely landscape I for years walked alone and each time I did I was awed; each time a mixed sense of wonder, desolation and utter loneliness would come over my being and I feel the urge to flee; other times a sudden, ephemeral, fragile joy would erase all of that, and I could taste freedom anew like a bird released from a cage, as I breathe the fresh air of the island whenever the volcano allowed it.

Life in these vast, distant, hidden realms

describes itself in more than one wonder: Cinder spark with earth's blood running through its veins, gargantuan faces, distorted in petrified, frozen expressions seem to shriek and echo in the vats, craters, deep tunnels, hidden crevasses, and bottomless abysses beyond imagination. Though rainbows always abound, along with endless forests of stars above, black Venuses that had once known the capricious goddess Pele lay dormant in a bed of undisturbed solitude, side by side with the optimistic, resilient fern, the brave coconut trees, the elegant bamboo, the ancient banyans, the solemn lava rock trees, moss-bathed, glistening, solid pillars of forgotten times and glories; the tall grasses, the hibiscus, the ohias, the orchids, the plumerias, the entire fauna and flora: Museum of wonders crafted by the genius of nature: Creation's eloquent verses composed since the dawn of time in the annals of Pangea. All suckle on life, surging like a phoenix right out the ashes beneath the understory.

The earth's belly roars spasmodically every now and then, in sync with the throbbing heart of the ocean, pumping pyrogenic life into the guts of the aquatic volcanoes in beautiful fury: Evolution in the flesh is being freshly served to the naked eye. A new land is born: Paradisiacal and infernal, the island grows in size like a living being as I speak.

Sitting in my insignificant corner of obscure witness I lend an eye and an ear to the sound of silence dreaming of distant lands amid the hysterical ravings of a million frogs out to curse the endless, rainy night in their fanatical, frenzied, insomniac, nocturnal asylum!

Observe!

"The power of accurate observation is commonly called cynicism by those who have not got it"

George Bernard Shaw

Observe with a keen eye and mind that which like you is alive: A human being, a frog, a bee, a leaf, the roots of a tree, a bird in flight, a flower.

Observe so you can truly see without passing judgments, outside the comfort zone of prejudice, narrow-mindedness and denial;

the psychological, electric fence you erect to protect ignorance from reason, mental progress and free thought; in order to ward off much needed radical change!

In order to keep alive the trappings of defunct traditions and laws:
Outdated history, the garbs of obscurantism, superstition, wall street, and deceit.

Observe the way nature never lies Listen well! The senses are countless, and so are the spirits hidden in nature's folds; you may encounter a rock that has one, a tree, a nest, you may want to change your ways and scare-crows!

"Life is for learning! Shouted a man
I befriended once on a faraway shore:
"You must get to the water at once!
That is- If you want to learn how to swim!"

Tropical Time

"We're condemned to kill time, thus, we die bit by bit"

Octavio Paz

Even the clock in these tropical parts rotates at a snail's pace, and the spiders tirelessly weave their networks of sticky webs as big as sails; swimming in midair, between the branches, veiling the trees like fine fishing nets cast to trap a huge variety of colorful insects, including bees and butterflies, destined to meet their doom as gastronomical delicacies for the spiders' expensive, delicate taste!

I've seen many a beautiful monarch lifeless, displayed on the sophisticated webs like art pieces in a wild and uncertain entomological museum of countless other masterpieces: Petrified fossils, empty shells of their former selves in the rain-drenched, craterous, mossy, glistening, mosquito-infested, jungle canopy, eaten by ants as big as flies.

Eat or risk being eaten is the norm:
Everything and anything can happen
in a world of critters governed by critters,
steeped in mystery, slow motion and vast shadows.
Everything gets done however long it takes:
The jungle's prolific hands incessantly
invent and reinvent life in its finest and or crudest forms:

The womb of creation, microcosm and macrocosm; the hidden and the infinitesimal; the amebic and the gargantuan; solid, liquid, sand, lava rock, sky and stars; all play the eternal music of being, all is functional, nothing goes to waste, all is timeless, and nothing remains the same: All is bigger than life and yet, all seems like a tiny mole, a speck on the lush, vast, immense, mighty blue face of the Pacific,

endlessly erring under endless galaxies of stars with countless, mysterious tales to tell in its depths.

Small Fish

"The sea, once it casts its spell, holds one in its net of wonder forever." Jacques Cousteau

I've swam over the years in a sea full of sharks and predators of high and low, from all walks of life; and can't remember the number of dangerous and deadly encounters I've had with a whole lot of them:

Sure I have sustained injuries more than I can recall if not insults and many a deep scar I don't feel like getting into at this moment; since, even time is unable to completely heal.

The skin does its best however, to fight most wounds, but what memory hides in its confines can take on the staggering fury of a cyclone of unimaginable proportions that sweeps through one's being with the daggers and icepicks of inhalation: Absolute and utter loneliness!

Yeah! The sea can be a dark, lonely and frightening realm where even a fish gets the blues, or simply allows itself to be swallowed by a bigger fish when all options run out, in order to put an end to its misery, as the saying goes!

My eyes have witnessed suicides on a massive scale, and believe it or not it's mostly the big, fat, predatory fish that end up biting the dust.

For to be in the sea, can be an unpredictable and fishy affair indeed; especially for the sharks who think themselves invincible lords of the deep.

I have known many a sea monster who ended up dead carcasse for the little fish to feed on.

Perhaps being a small fish isn't too bad and- speaking from experience-Is more practical, and in many cases, safer after all! Although again -sadly enough- many small fish never live to reach their goal of becoming full grown, big fish on their own. Such is life!

Inner Song

"Music in the soul can be heard by the universe"

Lao Tzu

Embrace
the wholeness
where beauty
resides eternally,
and where
human error
finds its remedy,
in the ever-present
Perfection above:
The next hour will be
the new dawn.

Tropical Paradise

"Traveling-it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a story teller"

Ibn Battuta

The idea of a tropical paradise broke the record for me and proved to be especially seductive when in the land of plenty I've experienced homelessness; when I think back at the miserable days I had the misfortune of enduring, distraught, totally ostracized in a purgatory misnamed: Los Angeles. There, where no angels dwell!

Amid a jungle of tarmac defecating monstrous, serpentine highways, wide-open-jawed, coiling and recoiling like gargantuan anacondas round the molten, disturbed heart of a hyper empire gone awry!

I stood there facing the bleak landscape with not a tree in sight in utter shock of my fate completely out of my element, trying to digest the severe blow that had just been dealt me in part, by a cruel fate and partly by dent of my own excessive hope; in a strange land where I once foolishly believed dreams and not nightmares came true.

I could laugh now at how wrong that was gazing at this horror called the Inland Empire, how innocent and foolishly trusting I had been all these years; putting faith in what will never be in line with my human nature or my moral principles.

I felt stranded like a caged animal and, after a sickening, white, disturbing night at one of the most horrible and filthiest hell holes I have ever been buried into- ironically referred to as shelter-I decided for the tropics and come what may; even if I had to lose a limb for it!

Luckily I got there in one piece. And to make a long tirade short-I somehow found myself roaming the savage, awe-inspiring and the farthest tropical, pacific islands from any land mass for years now.

Paradise on earth! That was the general idea I've heard since I was still a young boy dreaming of faraway shores and destinations in my native Africa; it all came true, thankfully, however testing the circumstances, but here too the monster had spread its enormous, suffocating tentacles, and were it not for the natives' gentle and resilient nature, this so-called paradise on earth will not exist, nor would it - paradoxically- have sustained so much insult and injury!

"The white man it seems, a native old man told me, never ceases to covet, never has enough, and never once hesitant to want more of everything; including blood! He never recoils from fencing the natives away from their own native land, or truly looks at himself and his evil deeds with a self-examining, discerning eye and for once feel ashamed; never!!

WARNING! NO TRESPASSING! TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED! And such VENOM! That's all I see:

Signs of hostility, extreme capitalism, inequity,

intimidation, illness, loads of plastic, wild dogs and violence even in paradise, wherever I happen to be treading, not knowing what the next moment will bring!

Dogs barked at me in the desolate, urban, dead landscapes of L.A and they bark at me here in the not so paradisiac lush Paradise of the pacific! And the culprit is the nitwits and brain-dead short sighted pimps who made this island - as stunningly beautiful as it isa paradise with so many irreparable holes in it. But I still love it! Because it is after all a true paradise compared to any place in the mainland or for that matter, any country in the world.

She Said...

"Whatever satisfies the soul is truth."

Walt Whitman

She said that bees butterflies and moths -More often than notcross her path somehow

just as they are about ready to die peacefully after having performed their last act of *love- making*.

She said she makes sure to escort them to a nearby flower as a final resting place and What a magical way to go!

This Moment

"Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life."

Omar Khayyam

Just expressing the joy:
This moment may never return:
I've got a book on nature,
a thatched roof for shelter,
birds for neighbors,
and a dose of humanity.
Mixed together,
they make a great soothing
remedy for the heart.

Ode to Coffee

"Coffee and love taste best when hot"

Ethiopian proverb

Magical berry! Red- eyed in the green:
Sun-backed queen of all beans,
my seventh sense!
Reaper of intelligentsias and interludes;
the scholar's loyal companion,
currency of the solitary thinker's plight against time
and the coffee house's pride:

divine and majestic brew.

Modern man's existential ally

from Paris to Istanbul to the far-flung, forgotten ends of the globe.

Morning time's cure-all except death:

Amid scattered brains, newspapers and why not jazz?

Coffee with its bewitching aroma is the epicenter:

A rituals' ritual, the antidote to boredom's grip and spleen.

Nature's bliss with an attitude!

The taxi driver's liquid friend in a late hour,

in the concrete jungle's grip.

The poor man's instant privilege,

Coca Cola comes second and what a curse!

The petit bourgeois' rehearsal of himself

and sleep's rival number one.

The Arabian Desert's spill, (or is it Ethiopian?)

on the whole of man's civilization.

Caesar would've loved a cappuccino before assassination, and why not Cleopatra, before the deadly kiss of the viper?

Socrates would have perhaps renounced hemlock for a cup of coffee.

The stuff was too stimulating, however,

for Nietzsche's nihilistic nerves and frail health.

Coffee's saga goes on with no end in sight:

This smooth masseur of the soul and redeemer of lost prides, the poet's constant, enslaving pleasure after that of words, to dilute time and tedium; tastes and tantrums!

Coffee and good tobacco, Sam Clemens would've agreed with me: The stuff of legend on the pioneer's roadmap and mind.

A prisoner's dream in the dreamless, lonely world of deprivation.

The only unforbidden forbidden fruit,

and the only and most eloquent, silent speaker

and ambassador of peace, of all, and for all! Well, almost.

Pacific Sanctuary

"Joy came always after pain"

Guillaume Apollinaire

In exchange for vile human gossip, mundane blabber, civilization's hard knocks, and existential treadmills. I choose the sound of the forest, the peaceable simplicity of things non-human: A refuge and a sanctuary, where I can be detached and part of the whole at once; without prejudice or interference on my part, waiting for nothing save for a new dawn, and a stroll beyond the canopy, to greet the mist, the dew, the solitary paths, the lava rocks, the birds, the clouds, the wind, the sun, the cinder, the ocean, the epic rain miraculously vibrant and generous; the majestic trees towering over the landscape like giant cathedrals reaching for the reins of the sky, speaking the universal tongue of evolution, reminding man of his utter insignificance in the great scheme of things, which- by the way- he compensates for by being the callous, unthinking, unfeeling, unblinking butcher of truth, Justice, and Nature that he really is!-That brushed aside, I free-spiritedly deliver myself to the care of imagination, while the splendor of the stars above, can make even deaf stones hear and dream.

Light

"I...a universe of atoms, an atom in the universe"

Richard Feynman

The light came back out dancing with no tears of yesterday's sorrow!

Epic Rain

Meandering alone,
awed by life's mysteries,
I still own nothing.
,
Steady like a horse
in a tumultuous race,
the rain's wild temper!
Lonely the feeling
this epic rain gives the heart:
I yearn to go home.
Chattering, crazy rain.
Two oceans away from home,
my hair is now gray.

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Strident ravings,
an asylum for the insane!
hysterical frogs.
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Despite the long rain,
I can still see the sunshine
diving through the clouds.
Like a deity,
ancient lord of the deep,
the whale's eye is wise
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How precariously
the world hangs in the balance!
What is to be done?
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Take a look my friend!
Dangling by a single thread,
is the world today!
Yawning volcano,
bursting molten inferno:
A new land is born!
Amid the thickets,
the majestic canopy,
a cautious mongoose.
Beyond the tall cliffs
as if by a painter's brush
the sky is red-gold.
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Ambling down the road
leading towards the ocean,
wild dogs bark at me!
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There's such a thing as
the fish that sings on the branch:
Such a thing as hope!
Back in the days,
the fisherman was happy
on these oily shores.
,
Hawaiian winter:
Both the sunshine and the rain
co-habit in peace.
,
Tropical weather:
Lighted shadow, darkened light,
share the same dance.

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Hazy sunshine;
the incessant pigeon's call
rings of sadness.