

Braving the Elements

Stephanie Carpenter

About this guide

Ecotone is a magazine of place whose contents prompt us to think expansively about the human and ecological spaces around us. [Issue 27](#) includes poetry, fiction, nonfiction, visual art, performance art, maps, and instructions—inventive, diverse pieces whose themes and approaches intersect in many ways. These lesson plans suggest some thematic groupings of the issue’s contents, and offer discussion questions, prompts, and assignments for a one-month unit.

This guide is geared toward undergraduate creative-writing courses, but it may be used in other contexts as well. Instructors are welcome to adapt it to suit their courses and classrooms. If you use or adapt these materials, in part or in full, please credit Stephanie Carpenter and Teach *Ecotone*.

Some of the writing and art from Issue 27 is available at ecotonemagazine.org; the remainder can be found in the print edition.

Relevant fields: Creative writing, English, publishing

Contents

Week One: Intro to Ecotone & Humans/Nature

Readings: Bell, Magrane, Gessner, Greenbaum, Gay, Kim, Glasgow, Shapiro

Questions for discussion: “What form should a magazine of place take in the physical world?”; depictions of humans and/in nature.

Writing exercise: Begin a journal of delights

Group project: Poetic field research, part one

Week Two: Animals & Elements

Readings: Kemper, Todd, Mohabir, Ben-Oni, Farris

Questions for discussion: On setting, stories, and symbolism

Writing exercise: Love letter to an element

Group project: Poetic field research, part two

Week Three: Boundaries & Bodies

Readings: Pelizzon, Clark, Somers, Fernández , Heit & Koppers

Questions for discussion: The body of the poem; constructed boundaries; personal space

Writing exercise: Elegies

In-class activity: Considering the limitations and possibilities of public spaces near you; imagining public art that calls attention to these qualities.

Group project: Poetic field research, part three

Revision exercise: Building from journal of delights to short essay

Week Four: Further Instructions

Readings: Frey, Brooks, Moon

Questions for discussion: Various kinds of instructions; space within the poem; return to “What form should a magazine of place take in the physical world?”

Group project: Poetic field research, part four

Revision exercise: “Delights” essay due

Take-away prompt: Write a piece in the form of “Various Instructions”

Week One: Intro to *Ecotone* & Humans and/in Nature

Reading for this week

Anna Lena Phillips Bell, “Venerable Instructions”

Eric Magrane, “Various Instructions for the Practice of Poetic Field Research”

David Gessner, “Back to the Island”

Abigail Greenbaum, “On Self-Rescue”

Ross Gay, “Delights”

Ann B. Kim, “Digging to the Antipode”

Matty Layne Glasgow, “bloom”

Rob Shapiro, “Yonder”

Questions for discussion

A) The editor’s note by Anna Lena Phillips Bell reflects on the departure of long-time art director Emily Louise Smith. Bell asks, “What form should a magazine of place take in the physical world?” She comments on several notable cover designs from issues past, marking correspondences between their cover images and the contents of those issues.

Consider that question of form in relation to the cover design of Issue 27, featuring the oil painting *Pink Gets Hot* by Denise Stewart-Sanabria. What does this design suggest about the magazine’s contents? What associations does the cover image raise with place? What associations does it raise with other aspects of setting, such as atmosphere or tone? Where possible, instructors could compare/contrast Issue 27 with other journals used in the course or with other issues of *Ecotone*.

B) Describing her project of documenting two antipodal beaches, Ann B. Kim writes, “Each day, the wind moved, the sand moved, the earth moved, the water moved, people moved, I moved, and time happened” (89). David Gessner and Abigail Greenbaum write about similarly fluid environments in their essays. Look at the ways that the changeability of nonhuman nature is depicted in each piece. How and why do the writers employ elements of their natural environments as symbols?

C) Consider how Matty Layne Glasgow’s “bloom” and Rob Shapiro’s “Yonder” provoke contemplation of nonhuman nature. What are some of the effects of the poets’ respective uses of the second-person voice? What qualities of nonhuman nature are the poems’ speakers calling our attention to, and why?

Delights

Writing exercise

Following Ross Gay, begin your own journal of delights. Strive to add one entry per day, of any length and focus.

Poetic Field Research, Part One

Group project

- i. In small groups, read and discuss Eric Magrane’s “Various Instructions for the Practice of Poetic Field Research.”
- ii. Pick three of the instructions to explore in group writing exercises over the next several weeks.
- iii. Divide the remaining instructions amongst yourselves (allowing for the instructions to apply to prose, as writers prefer). Each person should select three instructions that they will complete independently; if some are used twice or not used/not deemed possible, take note of this.
- iv. Embark upon a group writing exercise using one of the instructions today. Read the instruction aloud, contemplate and discuss it, and write together in response to it. Make sure that someone keeps notes.
- v. Plan to share your first individual pieces with your small group next week.

Week Two: Animals & Elements

Reading for this week

Dawn Kemper, “Horse”

Kim Todd, “Summoning the Ghost Bear”

Rajiv Mohabir, “Pancha Maha-Bhuta”

Rosebud Ben-Oni, “ $36\text{Kr} :: \text{The Hidden One}$ ” and “ $80\text{Hg} :: \text{Liquid Silver}$ ”

Katie Farris, “When You Walk Over the Earth” and “Speaking of the Wolf: Advice on Word Displacement from a Ukrainian Linguist”

Questions for discussion

A) List and describe the various settings of Dawna Kemper’s short story “Horse.” In what ways does setting shape the story’s characters, tone, and conflict? How does the white horse relate to these elements of the story? Consider when, where, and how the horse appears to Jody. What does the white horse seem to represent in the piece? Why do you think Kemper used this particular animal?

B) Consider the various kinds of lore and fact about grizzly bears woven together in Kim Todd’s essay “Summoning the Ghost Bear.” What does the grizzly represent in each of these stories? How do these stories relate to the question of reintroducing grizzlies in the North Cascades Recovery Zone? What seems to be Todd’s own position on this question? Relate the attitudes in this essay to Katie Farris’s poem, “Speaking of the Wolf.”

C) In poems titled after elements, Rajiv Mohabir and Rosebud Ben-Oni both employ second-person address. What are the effects of this choice? In reading these poems, consider the relationship of the poems’ speakers to their addressees. Also consider the relationship of the characters to the titles of the poem. How are the titular elements personified or embodied in these poems?

Love Letter to an Element

Writing exercise

- i. Brainstorm other ideologies or classifications of elements—the four humors, states of matter, and the like.
- ii. Write a love poem or love letter to an element of your choosing, drawing on research as needed/as possible within the classroom. Strive to characterize the nature of the beloved through vivid, particular details.

Poetic Field Research, Part Two

Group project

- i. Share your first independent poetic field research piece with your small group.
- ii. Together, take up another of the instructions that you flagged for a group writing exercise. Be sure that someone keeps the resulting notes and the pieces generated so far.

Week Three: Boundaries & Bodies

Reading for this week

V. Penelope Pelizzon, “Integrated with a Spurious Head” and “Elegy for Estrogen”

George David Clark, “Hot Minute” and “Postcard from Home”

Erin Somers, “Waltz”

Ana Teresa Fernández, “Erasing the Border”

Stephanie Heit and Patricia Kupperts, “Hurricane Poetics and Crip Psychogeographies”

Questions for discussion, part 1: The Body of the Poem

A) After reading V. Penelope Pelizzon’s “Integrated with a Spurious Head” and forming an interpretation of the poem’s situation and of the relationship between speaker and addressee, examine the appearance of the poem on the page. What do you notice?

Next, identify patterns of rhyme, slant rhyme, and eye rhyme in each stanza of the poem. How does the poem’s form suggest its themes? How does the poem employ the image and idea of a statue made of a mismatched body and head?

B) “Elegy for Estrogen” is composed of couplets, which don’t always rhyme perfectly. Reading this piece in connection with “Integrated with a Spurious Head,” consider the effects of these near rhymes. Compare and contrast with the regular rhymes and rhythms of George David Clark’s poems.

Elegies

Writing exercise

An elegy is a poem of lament for the dead. Following Pelizzon’s example, write an elegy for a quality or attribute.

Questions for discussion, part 2: Constructed Boundaries

C) “Erasing the Border” and “Hurricane Poetics and Crip Psychogeographies” are both two-dimensional representations of performance pieces in text and image. After reading and viewing these pieces, revisit Anna Lena Phillips Bell’s question: “What form should a magazine of place take in the physical world?” How do Fernández’s and Heit and Kupperts’s pieces expand the scope of this issue’s thinking about place? What questions do the works raise about public spaces?

Public Spaces

In-class activity

As a class or in small groups, consider: What are the important public spaces on your campus or in your area? In what ways are these spaces inclusive? What features create barriers of access, whether intentionally or unintentionally? How might an artwork bring attention to the potentials and limits of these public spaces?

Questions for discussion, part 3: Personal Space/Emotional Distance

D) Consider the representation of personal space in Erin Somers’s short story “Waltz.” How and why does Marian redefine her living environment—and with what effects?

E) Consider this story alongside Pelizzon’s “Integrated with a Spurious Head” and Clark’s “Postcard from Home,” two other pieces that depict vexed romantic relationships. How are physical space and emotional distance connected in these works?

Delights

Revision exercise

Take stock of your journal of delights. Which entries could be expanded into short memoirs, personal essays, or meditative essays? For distinctions between these subgenres of creative nonfiction, see Sue William Silverman’s essay “The Meandering River” (in her book *Fearless Confessions* and available online). Begin working the material into a four- to five-page essay, striving to develop rich descriptions with vivid sensory details and scenes, and focused, thoughtful reflections on the themes you’ve raised.

Poetic Field Research, Part Three

Group project

- i. Share your second independent poetic field research piece with your small group.
- ii. Together, try another of the instructions that you flagged as a group exercise, making sure that someone takes notes and collects the pieces generated so far.

Week Four: Further Instructions

Reading for this week

Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Second Sermon on the Warpland”

Kamilah Aisha Moon, “Blooming in the Whirlwind”

—First read Brooks’s poem, then Moon’s essay, then reread Brooks’s poem.

Emily Kendal Frey, “Ritual to Reclaim the Body As a Place of Love”

Questions for discussion, part one: Conversations between Poems

A) Consider Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Second Sermon on the Warpland” as an exhortation, another kind of instruction. In her essay on Brooks’s poem, Kamilah Aisha Moon notes that Brooks “employs the repetition and rhetorical poses of the preacher alongside the diction, syntax, and alliterative techniques of the poet” (85). Look for those moves in Brooks’s poem. What are some of their effects?

B) Note the distribution of blank spaces in Emily Kendal Frey’s “Ritual to Reclaim the Body As a Place of Love.” What are the relationships of the blanks to the lines that follow them? How do the blanks affect your reading of and relationship to the poem?

Scanning back over the poems you’ve read this month, consider how other poets use empty space in their works. Relate this question to Fernández’s performance documentations in “Erasing the Border.”

C) Note similar themes and language choices in Brooks’s poem and Frey’s; note also the contrasts in tone and voice. What do the poems say to each other?

Delights

Revision exercise

“Delights” essay due.

Poetic Field Research, Part Four

Group project

- i. Share your third independent poetic field research piece with your small group.
- ii. Next, review the body of work that you and your peers have created over the month. What themes and connections emerge? How might you arrange these works, if you were compiling a literary journal from them? What kind of cover image do you think would suit the journal you’ve made?
- iii. Share your findings with the class.

Questions for discussion, part two: Returning to the Cover

B) After sharing your group’s findings (the themes of your collected pieces; imagined cover designs), return to the question of Issue 27’s design, thinking now about the choice and effect of the cover image and about the presentation of the contents.

Various Instructions

Take-away prompt

Write a poem, personal essay, or short story in the form of “Various Instructions for the Practice of Poetic Field Research.”

Works Cited

Silverman, Sue Williams. “The Meandering River: An Overview of the Subgenres of Creative Nonfiction.” In *Fearless Confessions: A Writer’s Guide to Memoir*, 143–157. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009. suewilliamsilverman.com/the_meandering_river_an_overview_of_the_subgenres_of_creative_nonfiction_12178.htm

About the author

Stephanie Carpenter’s debut collection, *Missing Persons*, won the 2017 Press 53 Award for Short Fiction. Her work has appeared in the *Missouri Review*, *Witness*, *Big Fiction*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and other journals, and she has received fellowships and residencies from the American Antiquarian Society, the Sewanee Writers’ Conference, Ragdale, the Hambidge Center, and the Winterthur Library. Stephanie currently teaches creative writing and literature at Michigan Tech University.