My biggest takeaway about nature writing from the Northern Woodlands Conference was how to be a conscious observer of nature. The first speaker, photographer and naturalist writer Bryan Pfeiffer, discussed imagination, joy, despair, and hope in the context of environmental writing. Imagination is about asking questions, like why a particular species is found in a specific area. Questions lead to connections, which allows for a deeper understanding of a natural community. Joy is about the beauty of nature in its refusal to fit within the confines of study.

He told the story of seeing a meadow filled with purple asters and monarch butterflies, reminiscent of Robin Kimmerer’s essay on asters and goldenrod. Being a naturalist requires a deeper connection than the traditional scientific understanding of ecosystems; art and writing are vital to the expression of nature. Despair is about being truly connected to nature and other species such that their extinction is felt as a personal loss, and hope is about seeing the ways in which connecting to nature and helping others do the same can change how we approach the environment and climate change.

I attended a workshop about tree buds in winter. I had never thought about the activity of deciduous trees in winter, but the presenter (Michael Wojtech) talked passionately about the subject from a scientific perspective as well as an artistic view. We went on a tree walk and practiced observing and identifying trees by sight and by feeling the bark. Identifying trees is more than a scientific exercise; it encourages familiarity within a landscape. In other words, nature writing is where science and culture interact.

In the afternoon plenary, nature photographer Susan Morse talked about her wilderness encounters. In her presentation, she used inclusive language to refer to the organisms she interacted with; for example, she mentioned “meeting” a certain tree. When we consciously use animate language to refer to parts of our natural environments, we place ourselves within nature, once again emphasizing the importance of conscious observation.

Similarly, artists Kathleen Kolb and Verandah Porche talked about the importance of paying attention and spending time. They did a project documenting the stories of foresters in Vermont through paintings and poetry. Though their narrative was more human-centric, the idea was the same. Being a conscious observer translates into honest art.

Going forward, I want to practice observing nature without having a clear objective in mind. I hope to make deeper connections with my environment. Being in environmental science will better my writing because knowing how an ecosystem works and being able to identify elements of a landscape will allow me to feel more at home within a given place. Attending the conference reminded me to make time for creativity, and I hope to continue to develop my nature writing skills. Climate change necessitates the interaction between disciplines; since writing and science are both passions of mine, I want to further explore how they can connect and intersect.