

More praise for *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*

“This book is manifestly a labour of love. Felstiner manages to be both ecstatic and admonitory, visionary and attentive to detail. His immense reading is like a forest through which he has lovingly carved out several inviting paths.”—Rachel Hadas, *Times Literary Supplement*

“John Felstiner’s delightful *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* . . . chooses to show us, in vivid and articulate terms, the numerable ways in which ‘Poems make us stop, look, and listen.’ . . . He seems to suggest [that] poetic language in all its determined brevity and self-reference enforces an act of attention in a swirling, ever-hastening infosphere.”—Greg Garrard, *Science*

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—*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*

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“Moving from Genesis to American poet Gary Snyder, this book is both richly illustrated and deeply contemplative.”—Karen R. Long, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Felstiner . . . modestly opts to present a selection of poetic masterworks about the natural world—from Wordsworth to Derek Walcott—and interpret them in the light of our eve-of-destruction mindset. Even if savouring great verse can do ‘next to nothing’ about rising seas or shrinking forests, he proposes, then ‘next to nothing would still be something.’”  
—Boyd Tonkin, *The Independent*

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*Can Poetry Save the Earth?*

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# *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*

A Field Guide to Nature Poems

JOHN FELSTINER

*Yale University Press    New Haven & London*

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*For our next generations*

Sarah and Scobie and Brayden

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## Preface

### *The Poetry of Earth Is Never Dead*

The young John Keats coined this line in 1816. Since then the poetry of earth has lived up to his claim. Not dead but lively, it's more vital to us than ever.

Poetry has been changing over the centuries, and so has the earth. While poetry thrives, homo sapiens has slowly and not so slowly been abusing the physical world surrounding us. This book opens up a question, a wild notion, an outside—or inside—chance. Can poetry save the earth?

By “earth” I don't so much mean our planet, which will keep spinning till the sun gives out, but the natural world we're both part of and apart from. If poems touch our full humanness, can they quicken awareness and bolster respect for this ravaged resilient earth we live on?

Can poems help, when the times demand environmental science and history, government leadership, corporate and consumer moderation, nonprofit activism, local initiatives? Why call on the pleasures of poetry, when the time has come for an all-out response?

Response starts with individuals, it's individual persons that poems are spoken by and spoken to. One by one, the will to act may rise within us. Because we are what the beauty and force of poems reach toward, we've a chance to recognize and lighten our footprint in a world where all of nature matters vitally. When “the deer freezes” and Robert Hass wants that “moment after / when she flicks her ears & starts to feed again,” we too want the deer living its own life undisturbed by humankind.

Simple recognitions like this can awaken us, poem by poem, to urban, suburban, or rural surroundings, east and west, at home or on the road. Walt Whitman watching the sun rise—“Seas of bright juice,” Emily Dickinson spotting a snake—“a Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun,” alert us to a fresh kind of news.

First consciousness then conscience—a passage we all know as single spirits. Stirring the spirit, poetry could prompt new ventures, anything from a thrifty

household, frugal vehicle, recycling drive, communal garden, or local business going green, to an active concern for global warming.

Asking only openness, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* has every sort of reader in mind. Across many centuries, each chapter sites a poet in time and place, and brings out common motifs: sea and land, wilderness and civilization, nature and history, memory and loss, human and other animals.

This field guide to poems takes us through the Anglo-American tradition, beginning with Psalms and Romantic nature poetry. Later we find modern British and American poets engaging with nonhuman nature, cherishing it and sometimes just letting it be. Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams, deeply ingrained with the natural world, were environmentalist before the movement took hold. Then Rachel Carson's 1962 pesticide warning, *Silent Spring*, caught fire astonishingly, triggering the modern environmental movement.

*Can Poetry Save the Earth?* stops with Gary Snyder (born 1930), the English-speaking world's most striking ecologic poet. In the early Sixties he created a new benchmark of awareness and responsibility. Since then, out of our ongoing legacy, many more recent voices can be heard—Wendell Berry, Scott Momaday, Mary Oliver, and others. These poets, some of them Native American, African American, Canadian, Australian, and Mexican, are working on fresh terrain and deserve a chronicle of their own.

All along the way, poems connecting human experience to a vast nonhuman world share a quality in common with every reader. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it "My shaping spirit of Imagination." The workings of a poet's imagination show up here with some surprising color and black-and-white images—for instance, the actual "cellar bin" in Frost's dream of "load on load of apples coming in," and an ancient Chinese landscape scroll Snyder lit upon at the age of eleven, which gave him "an eye for the world that I saw as real."

This book's cover is an 1816 engraving of a thundering three-tier waterfall. Keats saw these falls soon after he'd said "The poetry of earth is never dead," and they blew his mind. As he put it, "I shall learn poetry here." In the engraving a small figure gazes at this cascade—not Keats though it could be, and in the pages to come, it could also be ourselves.

*Can Poetry Save the Earth?* tracks a poetic record rooted in the Bible and British poetry and evolving while America was richly overdeveloping, to the point of environmental crisis. Together the crisis and the tradition make for a time of urgent hope, like the question mark in this book's title. The poems gathered here may end up turning your eye and ear toward a world that is good to live in.



## Introduction

### *Care in Such a World*

My words are tied in one  
With the great mountains  
With the great rocks  
With the great trees  
In one with my body  
And my heart

Around 1900 a tribal shaman chanted that prayer, in the Yokuts tongue:

*nim yèt·au t·ikexo texal*  
*maiyiu lomto . . .*

An anthropologist transcribed and translated it. With their oral culture the Yokuts people had dwelt in California's San Joaquin Valley since prehistory, numbering in the tens of thousands. Now few if any speakers remain, but there are ways to call on the faith breathing life into that prayer.

"My words are tied in one / With the great mountains." Once upon many times and places, the bonding of words with nature was a given. "Let us make earth, Let us make earth," Apache myth has a creator singing. A Hopi sun god and spider woman sing each tribe to life. Australian aboriginals tell of totemic beings who wandered the continent "singing out the name of everything that crossed their path—birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes—and so singing the world into existence."

Another Creation story, in the Hebrew Bible, begins בראשית, *B'reysheet*: "In the beginning" the world was spoken, named into being. "God said, Let there be light, and there was light . . . God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of the waters God called Seas." The "great whales" and other creatures of earth, sea, and air were brought forth first. Then came the moment for

humankind, male and female created alike. God blessed them, that they should “Be fruitful” and not only “replenish the earth” but “subdue” it, “and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

Dominion—a fateful gift. It connects us to the earth through natural science, medicine, industry, invention—as in William Blake’s Creation scene, where stiff sharp compasses span our world. (plate 1) And dominion also works through naming, the heart of language, making poetry possible. After the seventh day, God brought the birds and beasts “unto Adam to see what he would call them, and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” When the Psalms sing out in awe, they also tie their words in one with the earth: “He sendeth the springs into the rivers, which run among the hills. All beasts of the field drink thereof, and the wild asses quench their thirst.”

Gusto like this, for the brimful world that words call up, speaks joy more gladly than dominion. Take the vigor in a creation hymn, Psalm 104, wherein the “trees of the Lord are full of sap,” Leviathan can “take his pastime” in the wide sea, and plants yield “wine that maketh glad the heart of man.” Here earth’s fullness comes to mean an interconnected whole, embedding us in its midst. Tied in one and naming things and creatures, words recognize this world—Adam’s task, and poetry’s too.

We grasp the natural world in poems even when it feels beyond our ken—skyscraper redwoods slowly swaying, deer leaping a high fence seeming paused in air. Think of Helen Keller, deaf and blind from infancy. One landmark day Helen’s teacher signed W-A-T-E-R in her palm while pumping water over it, and the girl’s whole face lit up. Poems speak that spontaneous sign language, wording our experience of things.

Along with everything else they deal in—memory, desire, joy, fear—poems live on the sensory shock of things: the sight of a circling red-tailed hawk, the taste of just-picked wild blueberries, the sound of rustling fir trees, the smell (and taste, and touch, and gray-green hue) of crushed sage, the cool feel (and sight, taste, sound, washed fragrance) of rushing streamwater.

Alertness to nature other than ourselves has spurred poets in every culture and century. The American William Carlos Williams incited his countrymen in 1923 to “imagine the New World that rises to our windows” every day. His signature poem does just that.

So much depends  
upon  
  
a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens

What and how much depends on this barrow, on rain and chickens? “So much depends”—an unending urgency.

That’s not a poem! poetry lovers sometimes say. No rhyme, no meter, no message, just a trivial sketch. But look and listen to “wheel / barrow,” “rain / water,” “white / chickens.” For one blazing moment a red wheel spins, rain and whiteness glisten, before a line break turns them mundane. And the stanzas balance on their syllable count, like wheeling a cart. Williams gave his poem no distracting title: what we see is what we get. “No ideas but in things!” he never tired of urging. His poem’s saving news? The here-and-now world we seldom really notice.

So much depends on seeing the things of our world afresh by saying them anew. Swamped by commerce and events—markets, movies, Internet, the world’s confused alarms—we could do with poetry’s exact enlivening touch for nature’s common surprises. Shirley Kaufman’s falling jacaranda blossoms are “so delicate / even their motion through the air / bruises them.” When William Stafford spots “sharp swallows in their swerve / flaring and hesitating / hunting for the final curve” and says, “I place my feet / with care in such a world,” we’re getting news. An attentiveness to such live detail is a crying need of our time.

### “News that stays news”

Poems run deeper than the media’s day-in, day-out tidings, and that’s just the point: Poetry is “news that stays news” (Ezra Pound). For centuries the nature of poetry has nourished the poetry of nature, fashioning fresh news. An anonymous medieval lyric lets rhymed and measured verse weave weather with longing, nature with humankind.

Western wind, when will thou blow,  
The small rain down can rain?  
Christ! if my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again!

Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* find a rhythm linking the year’s season to the spirit’s:

When April with its showers sweet  
Has pierced March drought down to the root . . .  
Then people long to go on pilgrimage.

Shakespeare's sonnet likens the sea to our lives, one line to the next,

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end,

and in this way fastens our mortality to an ongoing seaborne force.

"Earth's most graphic transaction is placed within a syllable," Emily Dickinson wrote a friend. By sleight of mind, our words make nature distinct—clear to us, yet on its own. In the frugal syllables of Bob Hass, translating ancient Japanese haiku, the poet Buson quickens what we see out there:

Morning breeze  
riffing  
the caterpillar's hair.

"Riffing" is common enough, but on its own line, a find. Bashō fools with us and nature:

Lightning flash—  
what I thought were faces  
are plumes of pampas grass.

And Issa simply astonishes:

The man pulling radishes  
pointed my way  
with a radish.

The radish man's working logic shows a traveler and poet the way.

Since the earliest charms, curses, prayers, and songs, through epic and modern lyric, poems have shaped our changing consciousness of the world around us. While earth remembers the balance and harmony sustaining it for so long, even with humans present, what's neglected in a time of crisis are those centuries of poems—the Psalm's "green pastures," Dickinson's "certain Slant of light," Gerard Manley Hopkins's "dearest freshness deep down things," William Blake's "O Earth, return!"—reminding us how connected we are.

Once alerted, our eye and ear find environmental imprint and impetus running through a long legacy. Starting with Native American song, the Bible, Asian haiku, and much else, poetry more than any other kind of speech reveals the vital signs and warning signs of our tenancy on earth.

Poets in industrial England cry out at the loss of rural communities and common land. Romantics such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats divine a sensuous spiritual resonance between themselves and Nature. Across the ocean, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson bend that resonance to their own voice, the first brash and gabby—"The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd

to the eddies of the wind”—the other nimble, skeptical: “Touch lightly Nature’s sweet Guitar / Unless thou know’st the Tune.” Modern poets cover the spectrum from embracing nonhuman nature to respecting its selfhood, with a leaning toward the latter. “You have your language too,” Stanley Kunitz tells a finback whale, “an eerie medley of clicks / and hoots and trills.” Elizabeth Bishop hooking “a tremendous fish” sees “victory” fill her rented boat, then its “pool of bilge . . . And I let the fish go.” “Looking down for miles / Through high still air,” Gary Snyder makes out pitch that “glows on the fir-cones / . . . Swarms of new flies.”

All too human as we are, we’re still dealing with what God granted in Genesis: “Have dominion . . . over all the earth.” Today this age-old question persists in more poems than ever, some warmly human-centered, some firmly not, some energized by that tension.

### “Not man / Apart”

Although the Bible sets us front and center in our domain, it also tells a story of earth’s untamable, unfathomable wildness. Who causes it “to rain on the earth, where no man is?” God humbles Job. “Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? . . . Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook?”—whence Herman Melville’s white whale, anything but human-centered. D. H. Lawrence in Sicily comes on a snake, who “Writhed like lightning and was gone / Into the black hole” of the earth. George Oppen’s ego-free “Psalm” simply says of the wild deer “That they are there!” He ends

Crying faith  
In this in which the wild deer  
Startle, and stare out.

There’s no telling whether they will bolt or stay. Robinson Jeffers looks to the organic wholeness of all things: “Love that, not man / Apart from that.” A telling line break!

Homo sapiens, a recent arrival, has to refigure its place on earth, much as the Copernican revolution upset our geocentric universe. Are we a part or apart? The ways we speak of environmental and ecologic concerns reflect these jostling mindsets. Should water and wildland be managed *for* or protected *from* people? The word “Environment” centers our surroundings on the human standpoint, leading to “conservation” or “wise use” of “resources” for our benefit. “Ecology,” a more recent term, sees a biosystem of interacting organisms needing “preservation” for the sake of the whole.

Environmental and ecologic thinking, in poems and at large, ranges the

ground between what we call civilization and wilderness. For Henry David Thoreau, “in Wildness is the preservation of the World,” yet he would leave Walden Pond for his mother’s home-cooking and laundrying. Thoreau’s successor, Aldo Leopold, says “Think like a mountain,” but that’s a tall order for us homebodies. Between away and home, there and here, we yearn for one or the other. The wanderer at sea in “Western Wind” longs for “my bed again.” W. B. Yeats in London desires “lake water lapping” in western Ireland. Boisterous Dylan Thomas calls up his “green and golden” Welsh boyhood at Fern Hill. So poems keep exploring the universe bearing “nature” and our selves.

Egocentric versus ecocentric: nature poetry lives by the tension. Like science and policy, poetry always proves there’s no discounting human presence. After all, a poem of purest notation still has a speaker. “Beauty is nature’s fact,” says Dickinson, knowing it’s our fact as well. “To protect the nature that is all around us,” insists the environmental historian William Cronon, “we must think long and hard about the nature we carry inside our heads,” whether wild, rural, or urban. Poems do best at tying nature to what’s in our heads.

“Love that, not man / Apart from that.” It is good to keep remotest events in mind. Two miles up in the Rockies, black Magdalena butterflies do their mating dance, and in Cuba, bee hummingbirds lighter than a dime are courting at two hundred wingbeats per second. (The data alone betray human presence.) Often, misfortune comes of human contact with the wild. A High Sierra bristlecone pine goes on growing after 4,700 years, its location kept secret because a budding geographer once cut one down that was then the oldest living thing. Under global warming, arctic ice floes melt sooner every year, so polar bears strand or drown. Snyder speaks for many poets now, trying “to bring a voice from the wilderness, my constituency.”

Such remote events have everything to do with everyday concerns. An ivory-billed woodpecker in Arkansas swampland affects us, as its (possible) 2004 sighting was the first in sixty years, the bird’s habitat—and our habitat—having been destroyed by extensive clearing. We can’t doubt anymore the great “web of life,” which Chief Seattle may have named in 1854. Poems witness to it. Stafford rightly places his feet with care in “such a world,” not dictating, not limiting the nature of that world but taking it to heart and mind.

### “Making us / look again”

Having seen something once, we may suddenly in double-take *see* it for the first time. Jolted by the delicate blossoms falling from Shirley Kaufman’s jacaranda, “the tree making us / look again,” we may think twice in a moment of recognition, even act on it.

Old or recent popular and little-known poems will bring such recognitions. “Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs” as Whitman confronts a sunrise. Seeing “a Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun,” Dickinson takes the snake’s measure in her “tighter breathing / And Zero at the Bone—” Seeing, and hearing too. The peasant poet John Clare, around 1830, hears a nightingale’s song “Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves.” Waiting for pike to rise from a deep pond, Ted Hughes hears “Owls hushing the floating woods.” We’ve heard of owls and woods, but “hushing”? “floating”? Moments like these have stamped English and American poetry, and are there for us now.

Looking again can also mean regarding local ground. Wordsworth was “too tame for the Chippeway” Indians, Thoreau declared. When Missouri-born T. S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* (1922) from his adopted England, and famously found April “the cruellest month, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain,” this sent Williams to New Jersey stirrings in “Spring and All”:

the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf  
One by one objects are defined—  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

He’d just started a little magazine calling for “contact between words and the locality that breeds them, in this case America.”

Also a lifelong family doctor, Williams felt the responsibility in poetry’s crucial quickenings:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.

A deep claim, and half a century later this wake-up call resounds. Williams lived to look again at his nearby river, fouled by industrial waste: “a pustular scum, a decay, a choking / lifelessness.” Now ecologic losses are nearly beyond repair and time is running out. As W. S. Merwin says about vanishing native languages, “the things the words were about / no longer exist.”

Realistically, what can poetry say, much less do, about global warming, seas rising, species endangered, water and air polluted, wilderness road-ridden, rain-forests razed, along with strip mining and mountaintop removal, clearcutting, overfishing, overeating, overconsumption, overdevelopment, overpopulation, and so on and on? Well, next to nothing. “Poetry” and “policy” make an awkward half-rhyme at best.

Yet next to nothing would still be something. The choices we make now or fail to make, and those foisted on us, determine whether we will subsist on a

livable or steadily degraded planet. Occasionally emergencies spark awareness: wildfire, hurricane, earthquake, flood, smog alert, bird flu, oil spill, fuel bust. Preferably we have poets, such as Denise Levertov. Voicing one woman's news of nuclear dread, she gazes on "thistles, nettles, subtle silver / of long-dried cowpads" and gives thanks "that this moment / at least, was not / the last." That startling silver, then the slant rhyme "at least . . . not / the last," and her catch-breath at line breaks all renew our saving touch with the earth.

### "Wee may lawfully take the rest"

What on earth have we been doing? How did we get to such a critical pass, where saving our environment becomes a crisis? Since the United States presents a model, with an excessive consumption of goods and resources also seen now in China and elsewhere, some voices and landmarks in this nation's environmental career bear looking into.

In the beginning, early settlers believed "the whole earth is the lords Garden" and blamed "the Natives in New England" for not following God's command to "subdue it." So "if wee leave them sufficient for their use wee may lawfully take the rest." A century later, when Daniel Boone left home for "the country of Kentucky," Nature's "ingenuity and industry" rewarded him with "myriads of trees," flowers, fruits, and "abundance of wild beasts," so he brought his family to possess this "second paradise." Boone's example resounds throughout American experience. At John F. Kennedy's inaugural, Robert Frost recited "The Gift Outright": "The land was ours before we were the land's / . . . the land vaguely realizing westward, / But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced."

Unstoried? The land's first peoples, five hundred tribes with their stories, left little permanent damage for thousands of years. Then harm came so fast that during the decade or two of an American literary renaissance—Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman and Dickinson, Hawthorne and Melville—Manifest Destiny destroyed half of all native inhabitants, their languages and habitats.

Beneath the destruction ran several myths that made it thinkable. To colonists on their quasi-biblical errand into the wilderness, indigenous tribes seemed figures in a tableau awaiting settlement. But their continent was not untouched, or a Christian Eden to be redeemed, nor was it desolate waste. The land had been managed for millennia, mostly well, sometimes ill: canals dug for irrigation, forests burned for grazing, deer and beaver overhunted, herds stampeded over "buffalo jumps." Often Indians cooperated with the white invasion, especially in trade. Still it was invasion. North America had sustained millions before Columbus. By 1620 and the Mayflower, possibly 90 percent had perished from



diseases the Europeans carried unknowingly. They thanked God “that he might make room for us,” and from then on made more and more room.

They also made sure the next generations would see this land aright. *A Concise School History of the United States*, originating in 1828 and “Adapted to the Capacity of Youth,” saw settlers landing in a “New World” of “almost unbroken wilderness” and natives painted “with streaks and with hideous devices.” Strangely “They had NO BOOKS,” and “Their LANGUAGE being destitute of abstract terms, caused the frequent use of metaphors in speech, such as may be derived from familiar appearances of nature and the habits of animals.” Metaphors, nature, animals! No wonder they needed improvement.

Colonists and settlers often learned from these natives how to survive on the continent, but we’d hardly know it from the historical record. One Yankee went on the Gold Rush and complained of salmon-fishing Indians “too lazy to obtain more than will supply their own wants.” He also admitted a “war of extermination against the aborigines, commenced in effect at the landing of Columbus.” In 1851 California’s first governor regretfully predicted a war “until the Indian becomes extinct.” Even John Muir, writing for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on Yosemite, omitted its ancient inhabitants except to say the valley was “discovered in 1851 by a military company in pursuit of marauding Indians.” Soon enough the “way west” had its way.

A young Bostonian, Francis Parkman, made his own summer-long migration, living briefly among the Sioux and crossing midwestern prairies to the Rocky Mountain foothills. In *The Oregon Trail* (1847) he enthused over the wild beauty of it all. A few years later Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* expanded on Parkman, proclaiming himself a “Dweller in Mannahatta” and also “in Dakota’s woods,” an admirer of “the flowing Missouri” who is “Aware of the buffalo herds grazing the plains.” He went on reissuing *Leaves of Grass*, where he “saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far west, the bride was a red girl, / . . . her coarse straight locks descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reached to her feet.” Did he come to know of the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee Creek? He marvels how “herds of buffalo make a crawling spread of the square miles,” but those miles had been parceled and scoured. Abetted by government, army, banks, and the Union Pacific, cattle ranchers secured the northern plains for themselves.

Meanwhile Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha* (1855), steeped in Ojibwa legend, language, and landscape, kept selling in the tens of thousands. Nokomis sang lullabies “By the shores of Gitche Gumee, / By the shining Big-Sea-Water,” and her grandson Hiawatha learned the language of the beasts,

Learned their names and all their secrets,  
How the beavers built their lodges . . .  
Called them “Hiawatha’s Brothers.”

Longfellow had grand literary genius. In this high romance, it displaced reality. The *New York Times* thanked it for “embalming pleasantly enough the monstrous traditions of . . . a justly exterminated race.”

Francis Parkman in 1872 regretted that his fourth edition now “reflects the image of an irrevocable past”: no more trappers, and the Indian “an Indian still, but an Indian shorn of the picturesqueness which was his most conspicuous merit.” (Picturesque? Conspicuous merit?) By 1892 Parkman’s romantic grief for the West and its “savage charms” reached biblical pitch: “The buffalo is gone, and of all his millions nothing is left but bones.”

Grieving in a different way, over Wounded Knee, the Sioux shaman Black Elk told Nebraska’s poet laureate in 1930: “When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. . . . There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.”

As if to erase such eloquence, for centuries American generations have been bred on slogans such as howling wilderness, virgin land, Manifest Destiny, Westward Movement, march of civilization, frontiersmen, pioneers, territories, Gold Rush, land rush, homesteading, cowboys and Indians, law and order, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Last Mohican, Kit Carson, Custer’s Last Stand, Buffalo Bill, “Go West, young man,” the Lone Ranger, John Wayne, coonskin, chaps, jeans, the railroad’s Golden Spike, and “America! America! / God shed His grace on thee, / . . . From sea to shining sea”—a hymn for its time, with the same beat Dickinson used in her verse.

The difference is, Dickinson’s and all the poems in this book are guaranteed to be slogan-free.

### “For usufruct alone, not for consumption”

A small-town Vermont lawyer, linguist, diplomat, and traveler spoke out against environmental recklessness a century before Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) spurred the modern movement. George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, considering the biblical command to replenish the earth and subdue it, found that “Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste.” Usufruct: an ancient legal right to temporarily use and enjoy the fruits of something not belonging to you, without damaging its substance. But man is “everywhere a disturbing agent. Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords . . . Indigenous vegetable and animal species are

extirpated.” Strikingly in 1864, amid civil war, Marsh knew enough to blame heedlessness and avarice for the exhaustion and erosion of soils, for deforestation, for destruction of plants, trees, insects, birds, fish, whales, whole habitats.

For the next hundred years, more headlong than other peoples because of our limitless vistas and inexhaustible resources, America kept gorging the continent as if bent on fulfilling Marsh’s premonitions. Hunters extinguished billions of passenger pigeons migrating in mile-wide, 240-mile-long flocks. Loggers stripped old-growth forests. Now we abuse North and South American land to consume a quarter of the world’s beef. Oilmen and their political helpers clamor to drill “some remote part of Alaska,” the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, that “empty wilderness” ripe with fossil fuel.

As for “the earth and its cycles,” says Alaska’s poet John Haines, “Nature has hold of the other end of the string,” and sooner or later jerks us up short. He and younger nature poets, compelled by each day’s worsening news, cross celebration with loss. In America the Beautiful and elsewhere, carbon-sucking forests and their wildlife have been lost to logging, wildlands to drilling, prairie and grassland to overgrazing, wetland and desert to developers, woods to snowmobiles, dunes to “off-road” and “all-terrain” vehicles, canyons to dams,



Scared Buffalo, Yellowstone National Park.  
Natural Trails and Waters Coalition.

soil and aquifers to agribusiness, coral reefs to poison and dynamite fishing, whales and dolphins to military sonar, seabirds to oil spills, pollinating bees to pesticides and development, gorillas to charcoal barons, elephants tigers snow leopards white rhinos hippos to poachers for bushmeat and fur and skins and ivory, brilliant macaw parrots to illegal bird dealers, 38 million sharks a year (“finned” then tossed back to drown) to shark-fin soup, animal and plant species to plunder, to cosmetic, sartorial, culinary, medicinal, and aphrodisiac vanity, and to corporate plus consumerist greed.

All this goes on apace. Turtles, migrating across oceans to lay eggs on the beach where they were born, find a Club Med. On a Florida road between two popular lakes, autos crush thousands of turtles a year. Leatherback tortoises, weighing up to a ton, have existed 230 million years, since before the dinosaurs. One of them, alive when Mozart was composing operas, died in 2006, as did another that Darwin may have found in the Galápagos Islands. Now many die from ingesting plastic bags that look like jellyfish.

Not only predator but endangered species, we have slowed some ruinous trends: smog reduced, rivers cleansed, forests managed, habitats restored, California condors literally snatched from extinction with one breeding pair, wolves and grizzlies reintroduced, bison flourishing, mega-resorts stopped in Puerto Rican wetlands. And public breakthroughs can occur: a crossover vote halting wanton exploitation, big business or a labor union seeing green, bicycles everywhere, an acceptable SUV, wind turbine, leaf blower.

Yet ecologic zeal can backfire. Preserving Yosemite National Park meant first evicting Ahwahnee and Miwok Indians, while Yellowstone got rid of Shoshone and Lakota. Arizona’s Black Mesa Mine, shut down for fouling the air, draining the water table and thereby sacred springs, had also provided jobs for Navajo and Hopi Indians. Cleansing the air may itself hasten global warming, because pollution haze absorbs and scatters sunlight. Curtailing ranchers and loggers drives them to sell land to developers. In Canada, the 1980s campaign against slaughtering seals, beaver, and fox for fur coats and scarves left native trappers strapped for a living. They had to turn their land and themselves over to companies building gas pipelines through a pristine valley, flooding the land for a hydroelectric plant, drilling for oil in teeming offshore waters.

Choices pitting nature against jobs, development, or recreation, choices arising every day as environmental awareness grows, can take nasty turns. Using an 1872 law, mining interests buy national forest and federal wildland at \$2.50 an acre, then while creating jobs they also sell lush terrain to developers at eight-thousandfold profits. An Arizona ski resort pipes up wastewater to make artificial snow on a peak long sacred to the Hopi. A coal-fired carbon-dioxide-

emitting power plant that serves New Mexico Navajo would desecrate and pollute Mother Earth and Father Sky.

The seesaw between ecology and economy has its ironic moments. When “My aspens dear” were felled for railway brakes in 1879, Hopkins cried out,

O if we but knew what we do  
when we delve or hew—  
Hack and rack the growing green!

New poplars were planted back then, which are coming to the end of their natural life, and today we’d welcome public transit. For sheer myopia, listen to a California man annoyed by the DDT warning in *Silent Spring*: “We can live without birds and animals, but . . . we cannot live without business.” Or take Chrysler’s CEO: “We’ve got to pause and ask ourselves: How much clean air do we need?” At times our entire saga spawns nothing but dismay.

That dire word “Unless” keeps cropping up. Unless China and India and Indonesia along with the industrialized nations make immediate radical changes, our children will be breathing unacceptably dangerous air before they’re our age. To drive home dire statistics we summon metaphor, the genius of poetry. Tropical rainforests, home to half the world’s species, are perishing, we say, at two football fields per second. Global warming sends immense slabs of berg ice “calving” into the sea.

How to realize that a comeback starts with us, that a moment’s mindfulness sends empty beer cans into recycling bins, not shrubbery? The essential choices, ticklish for government and industry, fall to us first as individuals in our eating, housing, clothing, childbearing, transport, recreation, voting. It’s a question of human consciousness, poetry’s target audience. William Stafford: “We must go back and find a trail on the ground / . . . and lie down whenever there is doubt and sleep there.” A thought like this might get us doing something—or doing nothing, just letting animal, vegetable, and mineral alone for once, for good. Poems make us stop, look, and listen long enough for imagination to act, connecting, committing ourselves to the only world we’ve got.

### “Moving / And staying like white water”

A welter of social, economic, and biologic crises confront the news that poems offer. In 1962 Carson’s *Silent Spring*, setting a benchmark for environmental awareness, began with an epigraph from John Keats: “The sedge has wither’d from the lake, / And no birds sing. . .” She believed, “The aim of science is to discover and illuminate truth. And that, I take it, is the aim of literature.”

Science, policy, and activism point the way toward solutions, but something

deeper must draw us there. It can be found in poetry's musical lift, attentive imagery, and shaping force, which stem from prehistory and live on in today's magazines, slim volumes, readings, slams, songs, Web sites, blogs. In country or city, poems make a difference by priming consciousness.

As long ago as we know, poetry has aimed to enlighten and delight. So have the visual arts, honing our perception. John James Audubon in the early 1800s painted five hundred American bird species, vivifying them for the naked eye: an osprey claspng a trout as it takes off, cranes tearing at waterlily roots. (plate 2) After intense observation ("Nature must be seen first alive") he killed many specimens, devising ways of posing them lifelike on a wooden grid. Audubon's art slowed the wholesale slaughter of birds and still helps protect them. Ansel Adams, his purpose sharpened by the granite spirit of Robinson Jeffers, crisply, majestically photographed the soon-to-be-overrun Yosemite valley. When Gary Snyder first saw Chinese scrolls, their mist-blown mountains looked like his northwest Cascades. "The Chinese had an eye for the world that I saw as real."

Artists like poets make us see. Their sheer craft makes things matter by getting them right, like John Constable trying for the shape and flow of clouds on Hampstead Heath, or Winslow Homer painting the endless Maine surf breaking at his feet. And poets have tried their hand: Williams, Lawrence, Moore, Bishop. Hopkins sketches a brook rushing over hollowed rock and that evening notes how "a blade of water played" on the rock and "shaping to it spun off making a bold big white bow coiling its edge over and splaying into ribs." Even his journal can't help charging things with music: "blade . . . played . . . shaping . . . splaying."

Shaping life—that's what makes a poem or picture take hold in us. The early American painter Thomas Cole saw in waterfalls a "beautiful, but apparently incongruous idea, of fixedness and motion—a single existence in which we perceive unceasing change and everlasting duration." A poem like a painting catches life for the ear or eye, stills what's ongoing in human and nonhuman nature.

Motion and stillness, a changing constancy. Coleridge notes a "*white rose* of Eddy-foam, where the stream ran into a scooped or scoloped hollow of the Rock in its channel." This eddy-rose, "overpowered by the Stream," still keeps "blossoming" every moment. Eliot says "we must be still and still moving," Williams senses an "unmoving roar" in Passaic Falls, A. R. Ammons in an "on-breaking wave" finds "immobility in motion." Derek Walcott recalls Caribbean swallows "moving yet motionless." Richard Wilbur spots windblown bedsheets on a clothesline, "moving / And staying like white water."

Here I think we have it. Poetry "moving / And staying" takes after water, flowing yet seeming motionless. That kinship says why nature poetry works so

well. Williams felt his poems “transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth.” Poetry, the news from poems, creates a sustainable energy.

A conservation miracle, change renewing order, is ecology in action. No wonder poets fix on a stream’s “white bow” or “white rose,” the mind’s eye finding moment-by-moment permanence in transience. Coleridge in the Alps is struck by “Motionless torrents!” and Wordsworth by “The stationary blasts of waterfalls,” Frost swears by a brook whose “white water rode the black forever, / Not gaining but not losing”—that’s the miracle. This figure turns up throughout the poetry of nature because it springs from the nature of poetry.

Imagination, momentarily grasping things in flux, admits in the same moment that nature itself is ungraspable. That’s as it should be. Likewise metaphors grip us by saying something contrary to fact. A snake is no whiplash, eddy-foam no rose, whitewater no blade or bow or rib, yet those images make us grasp things anew. Poems shaping nature make it at once strange and vital.

### “Going into Nature with Poems”

Like handbooks about mushrooms, ferns, flowers, trees, birds, snakes, this book offers a kind of field guide and wake-up call. It’s for going *out into* the world with poems in hand or mind, finding things “glazed with rain / water,” and for looking closer, going into the nature of Nature. When “the wild asses quench their thirst” in Psalms, and wild deer “Startle, and stare out” in Oppen’s “Psalm,” we’re brought somewhere fresh. If words tie us in one with nature, tying human with nonhuman, and if speech in the beginning brings all into being, maybe the speech of poems will revive our lease on life. We can count on this: the poems we hear have news for us.

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# *PART ONE*

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“stony rocks for the conies”  
*Singing Ecology unto the Lord*

“**A**nd God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” Not just “good,” as when “God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.” Or when “God called the dry land earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he seas: and God saw that it was good.” Or when God made two great lights for day and night, and let the waters bring forth living creatures, and made the beasts of the earth, “and God saw that it was good.” Not just good but very good, *tov me’od*, and so God rested on the seventh day, the Sabbath.

Strangely enough, after God “created man in his own image . . . male and female created he them,” the Bible does not add, “God saw that it was good.” But something else happened then and still reverberates for humankind. “God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

Dominion. Long before the Israelites came into a land of milk and honey, Eden may have existed within the Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia. There Gilgamesh, a Sumerian king “who knew the way things were before the flood,” slew the guardian of the Cedar Forest and felled its trees for his city. A dominant Sumerian culture flourished by channeling irrigation from the Euphrates, until overuse and evaporation eventually left the soil poisoned by salt.

Dominion, from the same Hebrew root as “tyrant”: an ominous gift, like

the command to replenish the earth and “subdue it.” That command fed the zeal, so mixed in its effects, of America’s Puritan colonists and westward settlers. Governor William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* shows sensuous affection for an abundant “new” world but a skewed eye for the “hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men” in need of subduing. Meanwhile, in England, Francis Bacon, contemporary with Bradford, set out the scientific method and foretold technology’s “jurisdiction over the nature of things”: “Nature to be commanded, must be obeyed,” Bacon said, with an ambiguity that still bedevils us.

Yet Hebraic legacy, while fostering dominion over nature, also ordains stewardship: “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it,” *l’avdah ul’shamra*, to work and to guard. Adam is of the “earth,” *adamah*, and the first humans are “given every green herb for meat,” then told to let the land rest every seventh year for replenishing.

Just as vital to the Bible scene and story is an everpresent wilderness where momentous events take place. “In the wilderness,” God gives water to Hagar and Ishmael, Moses encounters God as the Hebrews wander toward Canaan, Elijah hears the Lord’s “still small voice,” Isaiah’s voice “crieth in the wilderness” preparing a way for Messiah, and Jesus resists temptation.

A mighty litany of wild nature untouched, unknowable by mere man, climaxes the folkloric book of Job. From a whirlwind the Lord demands of Job, “Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder; To cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man?” Nothing in Holy Writ equals the rolling surf of God’s questions silencing Job, who has suffered calamity and craves justice. Job’s friends tell him, “God thundereth marvelously with his voice,” and via the Hebrew poets (and Bible translators) He does just that: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . When the morning stars sang together. . . Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? . . . Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high? . . . Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook?”

A diving sphere in 1925 descended into the springs of the sea. Given the species-wasting whale-hunting pursued into the twenty-first century, Leviathan’s majesty now seems almost crushed. Still that biblical awe of nonhuman nature persists with a modern bent. Henry David Thoreau cursed ravenous fur traders in 1862 and heard the railroad at Walden Pond: “what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World.” That same year, George Perkins Marsh was writing his little-known *Man and Nature*, warning that earth’s balanced, harmonious “sustenance of wild animals and wild vegetation” stood at risk from human action. A century later Wallace Stegner

fought “the Brave New World of a completely man-controlled environment,” urging that “wilderness preserved . . . is good for our spiritual health.”

However skewed the biblical sense of our earthly dominion appears today, Scripture does offer one saving grace: a lingo for the natural world. Just as God is deciding to make woman, a helpmeet for Adam, the narrative interrupts: “And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” Then the story resumes with Adam’s deep sleep, spare rib, and Eve.

Why, just before womankind comes into being, should the story pause for this event? Because the power of naming, in a patriarchal scheme, is reserved for man not woman? Or because the human couple should culminate all creation? At any rate, the gift of naming sets a benchmark before the Fall: “whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” (And why not flora along with fauna? Maybe it’s our closeness to other creatures.) “The poet is the sayer, the namer,” Ralph Waldo Emerson announced, “He is a sovereign” whose American imperative is to “enjoy an original relation to the universe,” and “fasten words again to visible things.”

Looking for wildness in literature, Thoreau imagines “a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them,—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots.” For some time now the sovereignty of words, imperial language, has come into question. This only sharpens the poet’s task.

Despite Emerson’s “He” and Thoreau’s “his” and “him,” a woman sixty miles west of Walden Pond was nailing words, enjoying an original relation to the universe. One of Emily Dickinson’s canny, uncanny poems spots “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” without ever naming him snake or serpent, describes “a Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun,” and says she

never met this Fellow  
Attended, or alone  
Without a tighter breathing  
And Zero at the Bone—

Walt Whitman, unaware of Dickinson though she’d skeptically heard of him, called his naked outdoor exercises “my Adamic air-bath and flesh-brushing from head to foot.” “Adamic” has come to mean a poet’s firsthand sense of naming things—what John Hollander in “Adam’s Task” calls “Gay, first work, ever to be prior, / Not yet sunk to primitive.”



God creating the birds sees Adam in His thought.  
From Etienne Houvet, *Cathédrale de Chartres*; north portal (thirteenth century)  
(Chelles, France, 1919).

A deep current runs from our mythic beginnings, from a world spoken into being—“And God said, Let there be light: and there was light”—into Adam’s genius for naming. Made in the image of God, humankind gets an earthly version of that divine creative power. (Apparently Adam never misspoke, otherwise

tiny mollusks in spiral shells might be crawling the face of the earth, thinking themselves “whales” not “snails.”) Why and how we name the things of our world must stem, like much else good and ill, from the savvy of *Homo sapiens*. In this sense, we are all poets.

Our primal urge to speak the names of things tallies with a striking trait in the Bible. “O thou, that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, Lift up thy voice,” we hear in Isaiah, “Say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!” Throughout the Bible, words and naming make for authenticity—breath and voice and speech and the command to speak, say, talk, tell, call, utter, declare, shout, cry, proclaim, praise, rejoice, sing, and make a joyful noise. Moses complains he is “slow of speech” but the Lord says “I will be with thy mouth.” Isaiah is “of unclean lips” but an angel touches a live coal to his mouth. In Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, “Speech reaches God because it comes from God.” No wonder poets feel “called” to speak.

Who can utter  
the poignance of all that is constantly  
threatened, invaded, expended,

Denise Levertov asks in a psalmlike poem that has already answered her question with “shadow of eucalyptus . . . miner’s lettuce, / tender, untasted.” No skepticism about the adequacy of words, about their signifying power, undermines biblical poetry. God stands as guarantor for human language.

When it came to translation, a long process renewed this superb Hebrew poetry, especially Psalms in the sixteenth-century Book of Common Prayer. Finally in 1611, when the King James Version emerged, William Shakespeare, George Herbert, Ben Jonson, and John Donne were in force. The poetics of biblical Hebrew found English at its height: “Blessed are those who, going through the vale of misery, use it for a well, and the springs are filled with water. They go from strength to strength.” In exile, the poet of Lamentations muses on poetry itself: “What thing shall I liken to thee, O daughter of Jerusalem?”

In Psalms, people have found the Bible’s intensest poetry and devotion alike. (*Psalmos* in Greek comes from plucking or twanging the harp, but the Hebrew Psalms, *tehillim*, means “praises.”) As far back as David and Solomon, ten centuries before Christ, many of the Psalms were composed by a priestly guild for ritual worship. Yet their personal, often solitary voice gives these songs their hold on us. As does their emotional range, from despair to exaltation, beseeching to thanksgiving—so often couched in nature: “Save me from the lion’s mouth . . . in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.” “Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.”

Praise and twanging, spirit and music, fuse in the Psalms' charge, their thrust. This force finds its way into modern nature poems, however secular and colloquial, from Dickinson and Whitman to Robert Lowell and Denise Levertov. Take Levertov's book *O Taste and See*, as from Psalm 34, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." Or George Oppen's awestruck "Psalm," beginning "In the small beauty of the forest / The wild deer bedding down— / That they are there!"

Not all Psalms touch on nature, but most do at some point, since the people they speak for existed hard by a harsh if sometimes fruitful landscape. The terrain yields imagery for desolation: "I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me." And for longing: "Like as the hart desireth the water brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God." Sometimes, famously, for succor and joy: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."

Naturally, wanting color and grip, the Bible's poets go local. Take the Hebrew maiden in Song of Songs, a "rose of Sharon" and "lily of the valleys": "My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-ge-di," the wilderness where David the "sweet singer of Israel" hid from Saul "upon the rocks of the wild goats." She says, "the fig-tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love." Equally besotted by her and nature, he replies, "thou hast dove's eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead." Ages before industry and technology as we know them, this grazing, growing, fishing, hunting civilization turned up metaphors rising organically from where and how people lived: "honey and milk are under thy tongue." In fact biblical poetry has roots in earlier cult liturgy and songs reflecting that same landscape.

Sometimes not metaphor but straight proof of earthly sustenance fills a Psalm:

He sendeth the springs into the rivers: which run among the hills.  
All beasts of the field drink thereof: and the wild asses quench their thirst.

The shaping of such verse, the way it moves and grows, proves that if the natural world reveals divine presence, that presence needs human speech to show it. In the western tradition, at least, much poetry learns from the Psalms.

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God," Gerard Manley Hopkins begins a sonnet, putting earth first while echoing the opening of Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament telleth his  
handiwork.  
Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge.  
There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.



Their sound is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

The “firmament telleth,” the vault of sky. Declare, tell, utter, speech, language, voice, sound, words: someone wedded to the Hebrew tongue itself must have composed this Psalm, someone enthused with language and no less enthused (in + *theos*, god) with physical and animal nature. Even secular nature poetry lives if not by the grace of God then by the grace of language.

Rolling along as a Creation hymn to God’s providence, Psalm 104 at the same time calls up a brimming, bristling earthly scene. It begins by celebrating Genesis, the first seven days. Then comes a panorama of wild nature, interdependent biodiversity, that exceeds in detail, let alone exuberance, the frugal style of Genesis.

- 10    He sendeth the springs into the rivers: which run among the hills.  
All beasts of the field drink thereof: and the wild asses quench their thirst.  
Beside them shall the fowls of the air have their habitation: and sing  
among the branches. . . .  
He bringeth forth grass for the cattle: and green herb for the service  
of men.
- 15    That he may bring food out of the earth, and wine that maketh glad the  
heart of man: and oil to make him a cheerful countenance, and bread  
to strengthen man’s heart.  
The trees of the Lord also are full of sap: even the cedars of Libanus  
which he hath planted;  
Wherein the birds make their nests: and the fir-trees are a dwelling for  
the stork.  
The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats: and so are the stony rocks  
for the conies.  
He appointed the moon for certain seasons: and the sun knoweth his  
going down.
- 20    Thou makest darkness that it may be night: wherein all the beasts of the  
forest do move.  
The lions roaring after their prey: do seek their meat from God.  
The sun ariseth, and they get them away together: and lay them down  
in their dens.  
Man goeth forth to his work, and to his labour: until the evening.  
O Lord, how manifold are thy works: in wisdom hast thou made them all;  
the earth is full of thy riches.
- 25    So is the great and wide sea also: wherein are things creeping innumerable,  
both small and great beasts.  
There go the ships, and there is that Leviathan: whom thou hast made to  
take his pastime therein.  
These wait all upon thee: that thou mayest give them meat in due season.  
When thou givest it them they gather it: and when thou openest thy hand  
they are filled with good.

When thou hidest thy face they are troubled: when thou takest away  
 their breath they die, and are turned again to their dust.  
 30 When thou lettest thy breath go forth they shall be made: and thou shalt  
 renew the face of the earth.  
 The glorious Majesty of the Lord shall endure for ever: the Lord shall  
 rejoice in his works.  
 The earth shall tremble at the look of him: if he do but touch the hills,  
 they shall smoke.  
 I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live: I will praise my God while  
 I have my being.  
 And so shall my words please him: my joy shall be in the Lord.

Always naming, always words galvanizing the things of this world: “The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats: and so are the stony rocks for the conies.” Here the Book of Common Prayer ekes out extra music, risking redundancy (“stony rocks”) to load this verse with three resounding *o*-sounds where the King James Version merely says, “and the rocks for the conies.” You can hear that resonance in young British choristers chanting the Psalm at evensong. And what of those conies, an English rabbit or Old World sort of woodchuck (Proverbs calls them “a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks”). Even rodents make it into the psalmist’s cosmos along with moon and sun, lion and Leviathan.

When the spirit is willing, poems are too. In Hebrew verse a kind of parallelism helps “declare” God’s wildly diverse world. Often the first half-line states a general truth, then the second specifies it: “All beasts of the field drink thereof: and the wild asses quench their thirst . . . The trees of the Lord also are full of sap: even the cedars of Libanus which he hath planted.” This turn of thought, from genus to species, acts out nature’s plenty in the same breath with divine order. Meanwhile the psalmist switches from “he” to “thou”: “He appointed the moon for certain seasons . . . Thou makest darkness that it may be night”—moving between remote witness and intimate address to God, admiration and conversation.

God’s grandeur in Psalm 104 doesn’t at all outshine its lyric brio and ecologic gusto, upstaging religious awe. The writer’s voice, Hebrew and English, feels livelier going into nature and naming the physical world—Leviathan, “whom thou hast made to take his pastime” in the sea—than in formulas like “glorious majesty.” With no stain of human dominion, this Psalm plays out joy in God and nature both.

Culminating an array of nature’s God-given world, verse 24 could close the Psalm well enough with praise: “the earth is full of thy riches.” But straightway we go back into the sea of “things creeping innumerable.” Later we follow an-

other formula for Creation—"the Lord shall rejoice in his works"—by plunging back into nature with a breath-stopping image of temblor and fire: "The earth shall tremble at the look of him: if he do but touch the hills, they shall smoke." Then after that cadence, divine duty finally peaks in a poet's credo: "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live."

## “Western wind, when will thou blow”

### *Anon Was an Environmentalist*

Western wind, when will thou blow,  
The small rain down can rain?  
Christ! if my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again!

Just hearing and speaking these honest lines is enough. Or better, singing them from this poem’s early manuscript. You can hear and see the melody reaching its highest pitch and longest hold at the very thought of “bed,” then hastening home on a wavelike cadence, eight notes running through one syllable: “a- gai . . . ai . . . ai . . . ai . . . ai . . . ai . . . ai . . . ain!” (plate 3)



“Western Wind,” sixteenth-century manuscript.  
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