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Wonder & Warning: The Salve That's Needed to Heal Our Planet

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Wonder & Warning | The Salve That's Needed to Heal Our Planet

by Benton Greenberg & Elle Anthony
Swarthmore College

final project for "Ecopoetry and the Climate Crisis"
English 71E/ENVS 041 / Spring 2024

created with support from Prof. Peter Schmidt
Department of English Literature
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Poets covered: Jane Hirshfield, Wendell Berry, W. S. Merwin, Layli Long Soldier, Ada Limón, Craig Santos Perez, Mary Oliver.

Also discussed: Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Earth's Holocaust."

Introductory Comments

Icebergs melting; plastic in the oceans; greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere; deforestation; industrial agriculture; pollution; overfishing. Humans have inhabited Earth for a mere fraction of its existence, comprising less than 1% of its total timeline, yet we are rapidly destroying it. The health of our planet is at a tipping point. Poets have been writing about the disharmony between the environment and humans for hundreds of years. Writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne plead us to change our ways through their haunting and ghastly works, while Jane Hirshfield and others speak through animals to hold us accountable for our faults. However, not all environmental poems are ones of warning. Poets like Wendell Berry remind us to forget the troubles of the world and to appreciate nature, while others like Ada Limón show that there is a light at the end of the dark tunnel. These poems of wonder reflect nature's beauty. Ecopoetry, no matter the style of writing, conveys the same message: we need to protect our home. Humanity is the force that has wreaked havoc on our precious planet, and we are the only ones who can save it. Each time we compost, or recycle, or choose a green alternative to the more convenient option, we are making small steps towards a brighter future. We must fight for those who cannot fight for themselves: the insects, fish, mammals, reptiles, and the countless organisms that call our beloved planet home.

Earth's Holocaust by Nathaniel Hawthorne | **Warning**

Born in 1804 in Salam, Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne was a “master of prose style that is individual, simple and direct, and yet richly varied.”¹ His writing influenced many of his contemporaries, including Herman Melville, who dedicated *Moby-Dick* (1851) to Hawthorne. Hawthorne’s works are characteristic of moral and psychological probing, and he often explored the theme of guilt and how it is a universal human experience. Guilt is a strong theme in his piece “Earth’s Holocaust,” one of 25 tales and sketches included in his collection of short stories *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846).² Other works by Hawthorne include *Twice-Told Tales* (1837) and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

“Earth’s Holocaust” is a lengthy short story, so I will only reproduce some of it here. This work (obviously) is not a poem, but we include some of its text here as a representative example of how 19th-century writers thought about human/nature interactions.

“Earth’s Holocaust” | by Nathaniel Hawthorne [excerpt]:

“In the general destruction of books already described, a holy volume, that stood apart from the catalogue of human literature, and yet, in one sense, was at its head, had been spared. But the Titan of innovation,—angel or fiend, double in his nature, and capable of deeds befitting both characters,—at first shaking down only the old and rotten shapes of things, had now, as it appeared, laid his terrible hand upon the main pillars which supported the whole edifice of our moral and spiritual state. The inhabitants of the earth had grown too enlightened to define their faith within a form of words, or to limit the spiritual by any analogy to our material existence. Truths which the heavens trembled at were now but a fable of the world’s infancy. Therefore, as the final sacrifice of human error, what else remained to be thrown upon the embers of that awful pile, except the book which, though a celestial revelation to past ages, was but a voice from a lower sphere as regarded the present race of man? It was done! Upon the blazing heap of falsehood and worn-out truth—things that the earth had never needed, or had ceased to need, or had grown childishly weary of—fell the ponderous church Bible, the great old volume that had lain so long on the cushion of the pulpit, and whence the pastor’s solemn voice had given holy utterance on so many a Sabbath day. There, likewise, fell the family Bible, which the long-buried patriarch had read to his children,—in prosperity or sorrow, by the fireside and in the summer shade of trees,—and had bequeathed downward as the heirloom of generations. There fell the bosom Bible, the little volume that had been the soul’s friend of some sorely tried child of dust, who thence took courage, whether his trial were for life or death, steadfastly confronting both in the strong assurance of immortality.

All these were flung into the fierce and riotous blaze; and then a mighty wind came roaring across the plain with a desolate howl, as if it were the angry lamentation of the earth for

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/nathaniel-hawthorne>

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mosses-from-an-Old-Manse>

the loss of heaven's sunshine; and it shook the gigantic pyramid of flame and scattered the cinders of half-consumed abominations around upon the spectators.

"This is terrible!" said I, feeling that my check grew pale, and seeing a like change in the visages about me.

"Be of good courage yet," answered the man with whom I had so often spoken. He continued to gaze steadily at the spectacle with a singular calmness, as if it concerned him merely as an observer. "Be of good courage, nor yet exult too much; for there is far less both of good and evil in the effect of this bonfire than the world might be willing to believe."

"How can that be?" exclaimed I, impatiently. "Has it not consumed everything? Has it not swallowed up or melted down every human or divine appendage of our mortal state that had substance enough to be acted on by fire? Will there be anything left us to-morrow morning better or worse than a heap of embers and ashes?"

"Assuredly there will," said my grave friend. "Come hither to-morrow morning, or whenever the combustible portion of the pile shall be quite burned out, and you will find among the ashes everything really valuable that you have seen cast into the flames. Trust me, the world of to-morrow will again enrich itself with the gold and diamonds which have been cast off by the world of today. Not a truth is destroyed nor buried so deep among the ashes but it will be raked up at last."

This was a strange assurance. Yet I felt inclined to credit it, the more especially as I beheld among the wallowing flames a copy of the Holy Scriptures, the pages of which, instead of being blackened into tinder, only assumed a more dazzling whiteness as the fingermarks of human imperfection were purified away. Certain marginal notes and commentaries, it is true, yielded to the intensity of the fiery test, but without detriment to the smallest syllable that had flamed from the pen of inspiration.

Commentary (by Benton)

"Earth's Holocaust" is a haunting piece. It presents a vivid and powerful vision of environmental destruction and societal collapse. A group of people, representing humanity, gather in a valley, which represents the world, and throw all material possessions into a bonfire. Recognizing the folly of their ways, the people seek to cleanse themselves of their impurities. The burning is symbolic of the destruction of everything that humans have created.

The reformists decide to burn holy items, and not even the Bible is spared. Hawthorne writes: "The inhabitants of the earth had grown too enlightened to define their faith within a form of words, or to limit the spiritual by any analogy to our material existence"³. What can you make of this quote? To me, it feels as though the people believe they are above earthly possessions, including the Bible. This seems to anger God, because "a mighty wind came roaring across the

³ <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9231/9231-h/9231-h.htm>

plain with a desolate howl, as if it were the angry lamentation of the earth for the loss of heaven's sunshine; and it shook the gigantic pyramid of flame and scattered the cinders of half-consumed abominations around upon the spectators."³ Yet no matter what the reformists do, faith always prevails; the narrator's companion tells him that the truly valuable things will remain after the fire burns out, and sure enough: "...beheld among the wallowing flames a copy of the Holy Scriptures, the pages of which, instead of being blackened into tinder, only assumed a more dazzling whiteness as the fingermarks of human imperfection were purified away."³ Hawthorne here highlights the enduring nature of religion. The spiritual meaning of the text has somehow survived, even though its physical shape has burnt to ashes.

Another thing I would like to point out is the conclusion of the story. Hawthorne relays the theme through an unexpected character, one that doesn't seem very trustworthy: "...his complexion was indeed fearfully dark, and his eyes glowed with a redder light than that of the bonfire."³ This devil-like figure reports that the source of the evil and vanity, the same evil and vanity the people sought to destroy via the bonfire, was in fact the human heart.

The last paragraph describes the narrator reflecting on this "truth." I will not describe it though; what do you make of his last train of thought before "Earth's Holocaust" concludes? Pay close attention to the phrase: "How sad a truth, if true it were."³ Hawthorne relays the whole point of the story through a character that the narrator doesn't fully trust. The state of the environment, of the Earth, and of society rests on the advice of a man who appears to be sketchy - why might that be?

Study Questions

- What is the theme that the devil-like character relays in the story, and how does he function as an allegorical figure?
- Consider Hawthorne's views on morality and redemption in the context of his Puritan background. How do these themes relate to this work, and to his other works, such as *The Scarlet Letter*?
- How does Hawthorne use the bonfire as a symbol of environmental crisis? What aspects of the bonfire ritual reflect real-world environmental degradation?

“Page,” by Jane Hirshfield | **Warning**

Born on February 24th, 1953 in New York City, Jane Hirshfield is an award-winning poet, essayist, and translator, along with the author of ten collections of poetry.⁴ Named “among the modern masters” by Steven Ratiner in a *Washington Post* review of her poetry collection *Come, Thief* (2011), Hirshfield’s work draws from many sources, including the sciences and the world’s literary, intellectual, artistic, and spiritual traditions.⁴ Her poem “Page” is included in the collection of poetry *The Beauty* (2015). Other poems by Hirshfield include “Mosses” and “The Weighing.”

“Page” | by Jane Hirshfield

Read the poem: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/150760/page-5d549a1660754>.

Commentary (by Benton)

“Page” is a thought-provoking poem that explores themes of renewal, reversal, and restoration. It not so subtly describes nature’s desire to reverse the course of history, back to a time when untouched by humanity. It starts with the surreal situation of snow falling upward into a summer where green leaves vanish, symbolizing a reversal back to a time before loss and destruction. Vivid imagery of nature reverting back to its original state exists throughout most of the poem. One notable reversal is: “puts the child, rock still in hand, back into his bed”⁵, where the environment tries to prevent the inherently violent human nature from ever flourishing, promoting a return to a state of innocence and purity.

The last three stanzas of the poem were difficult for me to interpret at first. What can you make of the first stanza, which begins “One by one unspoken, greed’s syllables”? The conclusion I came to was that Hirshfield is presenting a series of actions that aim to *undo* various forms of harm and division. To achieve a harmonious existence with the natural world, we have to silence the harmful voices, and unravel the threads of division, and break down the barriers that separate us. Following these interpretations, what do you think the second stanza means? What is the significance of the repetition of the phrase “Reversal commands?”

It is important to know an author’s background when examining something they wrote. To my surprise, Hirshfield spent eight years at a Buddhist monastery as a Zen student, three of which were spent in monastic practice.⁶ Buddhism emphasizes themes of impermanence, interconnectedness, compassion, and the nature of suffering, all of which are reflected in her works. In “Page,” impermanence and interconnectedness are especially prominent. Buddhist

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jane-hirshfield>

⁵ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/150760/page-5d549a1660754>

⁶ <https://agnionline.bu.edu/conversation/zen-and-the-art-of-poetry-an-interview-with-jane-hirshfield/>

teachings of these concepts are reflected through her cyclical description of life, how the mammoths, corals, rain, and all other forms of life are always connected.

Study Questions

- How would you interpret the penultimate stanza, where each line begins with “Reversal commands?” What is the significance in using computer commands to argue the necessity for a reversal of our actions?
- Hirshfield conveys powerful messages through her choice of words in each of her pieces. In “Page,” how do her words reflect the central theme of the possibility to rewrite history to create a harmonious relationship with nature?
- This poem has many underlying messages of warning; what are some of these messages? What can humanity do to listen to Hirshfield’s warning in order to save the environment? The poem imagines that its space is special: on the page the poem can reverse time and undo environmental destruction by humans. In your opinion, is Hirshfield’s a warning not to indulge in fantasies that we can undo what we’ve done? *Or* would you argue that the point of “Page” is to imagine how and why we need to undo what we’ve done? (For that must first occur, if action in the real world is to follow).

“For a Coming Extinction” by W.S. Merwin | **Warning**

Born in 1927 in NYC, William Stanley Merwin was an astonishingly successful individual. Termed “one of the greatest poets of our age” by Edward Hirsch, Merwin has won numerous awards, and was named the U.S. Poet Laureate not once, but twice!⁷ Perhaps one of his greatest accomplishments (aside from poetry) was his revival of land that was once a pineapple plantation in Maui, Hawaii.⁸ After nearly 40-years of hand-planting palm tree seeds, he fully restored the natural environment from a barren field into a lush palm tree system. A strong advocate for the environment, Merwin has written many pieces based on the natural world, including “For a Coming Extinction” (1967), which is included in his collection of poetry *The Lice* (1967). Other works of his are *A Mask for Janus* (1952) and *Green with Beasts* (1956). Merwin published many other books of poetry, which appeared regularly until near the end of his life. He died at his home in Maui, Hawaii, in 2019.

“For a Coming Extinction” | by W.S Merwin

Read the poem: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57936/for-a-coming-extinction-56d23be1c33a8>

Commentary (by Benton)

“For a Coming Extinction” is a deeply introspective and poignant meditation on humanity’s relationship with the environment. The poem focuses on the imminent extinction of the gray whale. Again, reading up on your authors is important, because Merwin chose the gray whale for a specific reason; these creatures are emblematic of the majesty and vulnerability of marine life. Once listed as endangered, Merwin’s choice of the gray whale reflects his deep involvement in conservation efforts.

What follows confused me for a while: “Tell him/that we who follow you invented forgiveness/and forgive nothing.”⁹ This line reflects Merwin’s views on humanity’s impact on the environment. What do you think of it? To me, Merwin is calling us out, commenting on our exploitation of natural resources for profit. We are hubris and too focused on ourselves to notice the impact the excessive whaling, pollution, and habitat destruction has on the whale populations. However, I highly recommend researching this phrase, because it holds even more meaning. In his analysis of “For a Coming Extinction,” Ian B. Gordon said, “Forgiveness has no real object; as part of historical association, it is a form of the engineering of recovery posing as charity.”¹⁰ If you want to look further into this line from the poem, check out Gordon’s analysis.

⁷ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-s-merwin>

⁸ <https://merwinconservancy.org/land-and-home/press-release-w-s-merwin-permanently-preserves-rare-hawaiian-palm-forest/>

⁹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57936/for-a-coming-extinction-56d23be1c33a8>

¹⁰ http://maps-legacy.org/poets/m_r/merwin/extinct.htm

On an interesting note, Merwin was also a practicing Buddhist, which is clearly reflected in his poem. Much like Hirshfield, Buddhism teachings of interconnectedness are reflected in Merwin's works: "When you have left the seas nodding on their stalks/Empty of you."⁹ What does the imagery set by these lines suggest about the whale's absence? Think about the food web, and the delicate balance of life in the natural world.

Three of the best US poets we read this semester studied Buddhism deeply: Snyder, Merwin, and Hirshfield. See also Li-young Lee's poems (not on syllabus).

Study Questions

- How does Merwin's use of direct address to the gray whale shape the tone and emotional impact of the poem?
- Merwin employs vivid imagery and sensory language throughout the poem; how do these poetic devices enhance the reader's understanding of the central themes, and how do they contribute to its emotional resonance? Do you feel connected with the whales; sympathetic?
- What elements in the poem hold up a mirror to human arrogance, our view that we are a vastly superior species to all others?
- In what ways does Merwin's speaker allude to the Creation story in Genesis, when he proudly boasts that humans were "made on another day" than whales? Is Merwin's poem endorsing such a reading about humankind's superiority over other creatures, or treating such an attitude satirically?
 - Note: for another poem that works with reimagining how to read Genesis, see our discussion below of Mary Oliver's "Humpbacks." She surely was responding to Merwin's "To a Coming Extinction." Her poem is dated 1973; Merwin's, 1967.

All these questions are important to the idea that Merwin's poems, though spoken with a quiet voice, often contain a warning to us.

“The Peace of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry | **Wonder**

Wendell Berry was born in 1934 in Kentucky. A leading voice for the environment and a staunch defender of agrarian values,¹¹ Berry has written over 50 books of poetry, fiction, and essays, a lot of which have the same message: we must learn to live in harmony with our planet. An opponent of large-scale farming, Berry advocates for community-farming that is the basis of the survival of our species. His poem “The Peace of Wild Things” was first published in Berry’s *Openings* (1968). Other collections of his include *Traveling at Home* (1989) and *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems* (2014).

“The Peace of Wild Things” | by Wendell Berry

Read the poem and listen to Wendell Berry read it: <https://onbeing.org/poetry/the-peace-of-wild-things/>.

Commentary (by Elle)

“The Peace of Wild Things” is a reflective poem that explores the solace and tranquility found in nature, while contrasting it with the anxieties and worries of human existence. It is a peaceful poem, yet right away starts off with the narrator feeling “fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be.”¹² He intentionally does not name what he is afraid of, which strengthens the poem. So how do we know what Berry is afraid of? That is, what makes him despair?

“The Peace of Wild Things” is an evocative poem, and relies on what the reader imagines to portray its message. When reading it, really try to focus on the images that come to mind: for example, “When despair for the world grows in me/and I wake in the night at the least sound”¹² should leave you with a sense of unease and perhaps even frighten you. The quietness of the text and the block of words of the poem rips its readers out of the real world and sucks them into its scenes: frightened, you (the narrator) decides to lay in the grass and watch a duck relax in the water, which calms you. I invite you to read the poem out loud; experience the last three lines as they were meant to be presented. The first time I read it aloud, I felt a shiver go down my spine, and goosebumps form on my arms. The images the poem creates are of pure tranquility, and you might feel profoundly calm. Unlike the warning poems of this anthology, “The Peace of Wild Things” asks its readers to forget the troubles of everyday life, and to be naive to the struggles of society, just like the wild things: “I come into the peace of wild things/who do not tax their lives with forethought/of grief.”¹²

This poem is not a warning, but an opportunity to see nature with a clean slate. It invites its readers to think of animals not as inferior or in the way, but as our kin, our brethren. Berry

¹¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wendell-berry>

¹² <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/peace-wild-things-0/>

asks his readers to acknowledge that Earth is not just our home, but the home to millions of organisms. Through the imagery and feel of the poem, Berry's unwritten fear is clear: he is afraid to lose this beautiful place so many things call home.

Study Questions

- Berry's whole life has been dedicated to environmental stewardship. Explore how this shows up in the poem. How does he advocate for a deeper appreciation and respect for the natural world, and what message does he convey about humanity's responsibility towards our planet?
- Read the poem aloud and reflect on how it made you feel, and what it made you think about. Poetry is subjective; does it relax you? Does it make you nervous? What emotions do you feel at each line?
- Consider the poem's structure and form. How does Berry's choice of poetic form contribute to the overall meaning and emotional impact on the poem?

“Obligations 2” by Layli Long Soldier | **Warning**

Long Soldier is a citizen of the United States, as well as a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation. She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her award-winning first book of poetry, *WHEREAS*¹³, is a response to the U.S. government’s apology to Native peoples in 2009 — and also to all the legal mumbo-jumbo with “Whereas...” legal clauses that were in most of the 19th century treaties with Indians whose promises were quickly broken. Long Soldier also created a participatory installation, *Whereas We Respond*, which was featured on the Pine Ridge Reservation giving her community and students an opportunity to voice their response. Her poem, *Obligations 2* is part of an anthology called *New Poets of Native Nations* (2018) a celebration of the first twenty-one Native poets published in the twenty-first century.

“Obligations 2” | by Layli Long Soldier

Read the poem: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/149976/obligations-2>.

Pay attention to the poem’s unusual diamond-like shape on the page: how should we “read” such a poem?

Commentary (by Elle)

The very form of this poem holds intrigue and warning. Long Soldier constructs a diamond form poem with a flat bottom and utilizes accentuated spaces as the structure of the poem. One can find warning nestled in the tenor of demonstrative verbs; struggle, unbraided, wield, resist as well as in the repetitive function of the phrase ‘the grief,’ ‘the grief,’ ‘the grief,’ ‘the grief.’ However, the most haunting of warnings rise in the deliberate generous spaces given throughout this poem. Comprehensively the spaces span vertically, horizontally and diagonally inviting the reader in every direction to place themselves amidst the maze of words. The warning it seems may be to fail altogether to put our stories in these spaces, to not consider what we have wielded unto grief, to not unearth what we have buried into ash, to not consider the orientation of our story in the context of others.

Visually and structurally the center line of grief in this poem suggests that grief runs between us, among us, and within us. Grief, a human inevitable experience that connects us to one another, positing that a communal call to grieve is necessary as much as the individual lines of grief that have traced our paths. Long Soldier offers a communal entry to this poem, “as we” and sprinkles the word “we” throughout the poem, concluding with a collective phrase, “across our faces.” While the form of this poem offers the reader credence to their individual human story by the expansion of freedom, choice, and mystery as to how to engage – Long Soldier’s

¹³ <https://bookshop.org/p/books/whereas-poems-layli-long-soldier/8234998?ean=9781555977672>

form also reins in these seemingly limitless options by drawing down into our core obligation to one another, remembering our collective humanity.

Note: this poem is called “Obligations 2” because Long Soldier interview many Native American women educators about the problems they faced and what obligations they felt to try to find solutions. She created several “Obligations” poems. Most of the phases in this poem were spoken those women, and then sorted and arranged into a diamond shape by Long Soldier. It’s not really correct to think that this poem has a single “author.”

Study Questions

- In Long Soldier’s debut full length collection, *WHEREAS* (2017), she introduces the collection with an epigraph by poet Arthur Sze that reads, “no word has any special hierarchy over any other.”¹⁴ In this diamond form poem, each word or phrase is meant to be accessible to anyone with no weight or authority given by dominant culture. Given your social location, which of these words or phrases resonate with you? What weight have they been given in your life and by whom?
- Author and activist James Baldwin says, “history is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.”¹⁵ Long Soldier suggests verbs like ‘unbraid’, ‘question’, ‘find’, ‘understand’, as ways to get curious about the history that lives in all of us. Create your own diamond poem given the history you carry and the future you hope for. As you prepare to write your poem, consider what verbs you will use, where grief might sit in your poem, and what collective tool is needed to unearth and nurture the roots that will bring all faces to the light of day?
- This poem does not offer a subject for grief. Is it colonialism? The environment? Erasure of Indigenous culture and language? As you read this poem, what subject(s) of grief surfaces for you?

¹⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09574042.2023.2183620>

¹⁵ <https://time.com/4680673/james-baldwin-documentary-history/>

“After the Dragonflies” by W.S. Merwin¹⁶ | Wonder/Warning

William Stanley (W.S) Merwin was born in 1927, and raised in New Jersey and Scranton, Pennsylvania as the son of a minister. This was essentially how he became such an esteemed poet, as he wrote hymns for his father inherently the moment he learned to write!¹⁷ Merwin continued to manifest this faith through his practice of buddhism when he moved to Maui in the early 70s. An anti-war activist who inspired our generation and his alike, with his zest for the environment and its restoration. “After the Dragonflies” is published in *Garden of Time (2016)*¹⁸, a collection of memories, closest to his death in 2019. At this time he began to lose his vision, but continued to capture the energy and wonder of nature while simultaneously warning all of us. His other works include *The Rain in the Trees* (1988) and *The Moon Before Morning* (2014)¹⁹.

“After the Dragonflies” | by W.S Merwin

Read the poem: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/07/24/magazine/ws-merwin-after-the-dragonflies.html>

Commentary (by Elle)

“After the Dragonflies” dually illustrates the profound awe and beauty that the simplest creatures of nature exude while simultaneously addressing our ignorance towards them, and the environment that they reside in. The alienation that we as human beings have used to diverge from our origins serves as an omen for the potential erasure of species, and the extinction of wonder. The line “Dragonflies were as common as sunlight” immediately envelops the reader, inviting them to experience liminal time. The use of “were” brings readers to question: should they situate themselves in the future or is this a present moment? Either way the use of “once common” hints that the dragonfly population is dissipating, potentially even going extinct.

The form of the poem is free-flowing, embodying the essence of much of Merwin’s later work. Its unbroken manner and non-punctualized structure could suggest one of two things. One: that the light of the dragonfly conveys itself as a kind of energy that reverberates all the way through the body of the poem, and with no period acting as a termination point, the energy of that light and wonder escapes, leaving us indefinitely. Two, this lack of pauses in the poem could represent the “hurrying” of humankind and our inability to stop and revel in the magnificence of these creatures, ultimately leading to their extinction. Which interpretation of the poem’s form resonated with you the most, and do you have another possible explanation?

¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/07/24/magazine/ws-merwin-after-the-dragonflies.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-s-merwin>

¹⁸ <https://www.coppercanyonpress.org/books/garden-time-by-w-s-merwin/>

¹⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/W-S-Merwin>

It is interesting that someone who is sightless (as Merwin was late in life) is the one that truly sees these creatures and calls attention to them. Do you think we have to lose sight of things that are directly in front of us (normally “bigger and better” things in American Society) in order to have true sight of the souls around us? In some ways what comes with this is the need for humility, “when we appeared in their eyes/we were strangers”, this line references the possibility that insects were once the species that preceded and ruled the world²⁰, and maybe we should honor that. Do you think that this is a warning? Will we always be the most predominant species, or will we too also go extinct?

Study Questions

- Human destruction of wetlands and marshes, pollution and insecticides are aiding in the rapid decline of insects. “A number of scientists have recently warned of an ‘insect apocalypse’”²¹ because of this reality. The word “apocalypse”²² comes from the Greek word for “revelation” or “that which is uncovered”.
 - As you read this poem what strikes you as a revelatory notion?
 - What is being uncovered?
 - And to what end?
- Dragonflies have unpredictable flight patterns; each of their four wings function in independent movements allowing them to hover, glide and change their course of direction quickly. The veins of their wings also provide a network by which they can distribute stress.²³
 - How do the words “unpredictable”, “hover”, “glide” or “change course” resonate with you as you experience your academic path, your vocational track or your overall wellness?

²⁰ <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/science/global-tree-of-life-study-shows-insects-ruled-earth-400-million-years-ago/#:~:text=Evolution-Global%20tree%20of%20life%20study%20shows%20insects%20ruled,Earth%20400%20million%20years%20ago>

²¹ <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/02/new-assessment-finds-dragonflies-and-damselflies-in-trouble-worldwide/#:~:text=Human%20destruction%20of%20marshes%20and,supply%20clean%20water%20and%20food>

²² <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/brevelation.html#:~:text=The%20Book%20of%20Revelation%20in,pull%20the%20lid%20off%20something>

²³ <https://worlddragonfly.org/wp-content/uploads/ijo/tijo20.v023.i01/13887890.2019.1677515/13887890.2019.1677515.pdf>

“The Leash” by Ada Limón | **Wonder**

Born on March 28, 1976, Ada Limón is a California native with Mexican heritage. Limón became the 24th Poet Laureate of the United States in July of 2022. Limón’s signature project as Poet Laureate is, “You Are Here”. This project comprises two major initiatives: a new anthology of nature poems and a series of poetry as public art at seven national parks, as well as a call for the public to participate, with the question prompt “What would you write in response to the landscape around you?” Limón also wrote a poem that will be engraved on NASA's Europa Clipper Spacecraft that will be launched to the second moon of Jupiter in October 2024.²⁴

“The Leash” | by Ada Limón

Read the poem: <https://poets.org/poem/leash>.

“The Leash” was published in Limón’s collection *The Carrying* (2018).

Commentary (by Elle)

Ada Limón’s poem "The Leash", paints a quick, chaotic and vivid picture of how precarious the state of our existence is. The form itself depicts a continuous, winding leash back and forth. At first blush this poem is a heart-wrenching litany of the brutality of human violence. The violence of poisoning the environment, the violence of fear and hatred, the violence of weapons eroding our human constitutions as much as our landscapes and communities. The tenor of the poem can surface themes of warning, danger, despair. However, Limón nestles cairns of goodness and wonder throughout this poem, just enough to keep reading, suggesting the natural world does this too, just enough to keep living.

Limón highlights the power of community, the hope for healing, the zest of life displayed by her dog running straight down the street. And her simple, powerful two word directive, “don’t die” encapsulates the tension of the horrors of human behavior and yet the need of humans in relationship to birth healing and hope. She may also wonder, though, whether we’re also as a species like that dog and its delusions—and without a leash? Thus her one swear-word in the poem...

Study Questions

- Limón wonders despite the death that floats belly-up all around us if there is “still something singing?” She then describes indescribable sounds, “wounds closing”, “living limbs”, “marvel”, her dog’s “goddamn enthusiasm.” The catalyst to wonder, seems to be wonder itself. What are you wondering about these days? What senses does it pique? What do you hear, smell, or see that might prove indescribable but true?

²⁴ <https://www.adalimon.net/about>

- Limón uses the metaphor of a leash to ensure the survival of hope and innocence. Take a slow walk around your environs and consider the ways you are helped by this metaphor as you think about the atrocities the planet is enduring. How long is the tether on your leash to goodness, hope, healing, innocence? What would you be helped by yanking closer to you?
- Repeat Limón's words, "the truth is: I don't know" quietly to yourself three times. When you are ready, say this same statement outloud three times. Allow 30 seconds of silence in between each repetition. Notice what surfaces for you in your body, your mind, your heart. What question(s) could it be that you are responding to? What does this statement shut down or open up?

“ars pasifika” by Craig Santos Perez | **Warning**

Craig Santos Perez is a native Chamorro from Mongmong, Guam (Guahan). Perez has authored six books of poetry including *Habitat Threshold* (Omnidawn Publishing, 2020). His poems cover topics of Pacific culture, immigration, the effects of colonialism and often are cast from his view of parenthood and the responsibility we have to the next generation. His poem “Twinkle, Twinkle, Morning Star”²⁵ is a beautiful example of ancestry and the next generation coming into view as a call to all of humanity for attention and care. It is written in collaboration with his wife, Brandy Nālani McDougall and their one-year old daughter, Kaikainali‘i.

“ars pasifika” | by Craig Santos Perez

Read the poem: <https://poets.org/poem/ars-pasifika>.

Commentary (by Elle)

Perez’s short poem, “ars pasifika,” dances between the wonder and the heartache of a world engulfed by the seas of human inaction, paralysis and despair. Perez brings attention to the current climate crisis of global warming and rising sea levels and names the largest tidal threat: silence. The form of his poem flows visually like a shoreline offering a simplicity of style that neither crowds or threatens to compete with the central invitation of which the reader gives shape to. The form allows the reader to reflect on all that could fill the edges of this poem – the advancement of technology, research, and science, our human activity that has the potential to be a collaborative force for change in addressing some of our most pressing environmental concerns. And the form turns the reader to see the reality that we have been woefully mute in naming the “evils” that contribute to our planet’s decline, as if we are more comfortable under the “veils” of ignorance.

Perez’ poem subtly warns us that the tides of silence will drown us all – our planet, the flora, the fauna, the human species – all of it. However, to stay afloat he points us to our God-given vessels calling on his Pasifika ancestry and naming the canoe. The canoe, a vessel that was a mode of life, of survival for fishing, war and battle, as well as transport. Similarly, suggesting that our tongues are the same mode of life for us; a means by which we intake sustenance, a way to fight the injustices and enemies of our day, and to transport ideas into the community and environment that surrounds us. It’s worth remembering that the ancestors of those living on Guam/Guahan and Hawaii all perfected the art of traveling to distant lands via large outrigger canoes (necessary in oceans with their large waves) and reading the stars to chart their directions. Those skills demonstrated both their knowledge and their courage.

He breaks down an overwhelming thing like the ocean, or an immense problem like the climate crisis into an accessible vessel that offers all of us a way to stay afloat, without forgetting

²⁵ <https://poets.org/poem/twinkle-twinkle-morning-star>

our very bodies or ancestry as a way to rearrange our presence on this Earth from mere witnesses of our environs, to primary influences of a new way forward.

Study Questions

- The childhood game of “mercy” involves interlocking hands and fingers with an opponent and twisting and digging, inflicting pain until the opponent gives in and cries, “mercy!” Perez’s poem suggests the planet is at the breaking point and is yelling “ocean!” What mercy could you offer the oceans? What small rearrangement could you make with your everyday fundamental tools at your disposal?
- Author and activist Audre Lorde says, “your silence will not protect you”²⁶. The poem “ars pasifika” illuminates this notion as well, suggesting that we will all suffer as a result of silence. In what ways do you witness this reality in your days? Where you work? Live? Play? What rises in you that is begging for form and release?
- Select two words that are composed of the same letters. Curate a poem that responds to the prompt, “what is on the tip of your tongue as you consider the enormity of the climate crisis?” Be sure to utilize your two selected words in a manner that rearranges not only the letters within the word, but aims to rearrange the reader’s perspective of the natural world and their place and action among it.
- Why does the poem play with the word “Pacific” or “pacifica” and spell it “pasifika”?

²⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/716939-sister-outsider-essays-and-speeches>

“Humpbacks” by Mary Oliver | **Wonder**

Mary Oliver was an American poet born in Ohio on September 10, 1935 and she died on January 17, 2019.²⁷ Oliver published more than fifteen collections of poetry, her first of which *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, was published in 1965. Oliver’s poetry is known for instilling a sense of wonder and awe of the natural world by inviting the reader to intimately pay attention, slow down and regard the natural world as divinely sacred. Oliver’s poetry embraces mystery, uncertainty and death as means by which we expand and strengthen our relationship to the environment around us.

“Humpbacks” | by Mary Oliver

Read the poem: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2024/1/15/humpbacks-by-mary-oliver>.

Note: Beware, many other online versions of the poem print only a shortened excerpt from the poem, or alter Oliver’s carefully chosen line-breaks and stanza divisions.

Hear “Humpbacks” read on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pBN0QtNN5s>.

You can also enjoy the poem in print in *American Primitive* (1973), the volume of Oliver’s in which it first appeared.

Commentary (by Elle)

“Humpbacks” is a poem that is divided into several stanzas representing a lyrical form with verses and refrains that offer the reader an unfolding story and song. Oliver, the conductor of this piece depicts an external world that is brimming with pops of wonder and joy as we pause and lean in to take note, as well as an interior world that is flush with the same potential and components. Oliver establishes an equal starting point, “an original fire” that we all inhabit and simultaneously it inhabits us. It’s from here that Oliver takes the reader on a journey of unimaginable and yet known playgrounds of joy.

Oliver names pain and joy alongside one another, “a tonnage of barnacles” evident on the humpbacks and their “scarred flukes,” alluding to the weight and threat of existence that humpbacks have endured – while still showcasing the existence of joy and curiosity in their play and friendliness. Perhaps this is what Oliver is referencing when she repeats the refrain, “you know what I mean.” Watching their sheer beauty careen from the depths of the ocean, a world mostly unexplored and yet 100% corrupted by humans, it would be hard to refuse our hand in the endangerment of this species, “not for any reason you can’t imagine.” Both the beauty and the pain, this is the birthplace of wonder. Wonder is a feeling to be experienced, rather than explained, a knowing that binds us to the natural world and beyond.

²⁷ <https://poets.org/poet/mary-oliver>

Perhaps Oliver and the humpbacks show us that wonder is what holds our bodies and our dreams and keeps us humming the melody of life, both sorrow and joy, the unimaginable and the seen, the danger and the resilience rippling through all of us.

Study Questions

- In the last stanza Oliver writes,
 “its spirit
 longing to fly while the dead-weight bones
 toss their dark mane”

The humpback whale’s long pectoral fins inspired its scientific name, *Megaptera*, which means “big-winged”²⁸. Humpbacks weigh somewhere in the vicinity of 60,000 pounds and yet their agile acrobatics suggest there is no barrier to flight. Oliver personifies our dreams to ignite a sense of gravity-defying potential. We can imagine a celestial sphere waiting to be broken through, just as the whale breaks through the ocean “ceiling.” How does Oliver’s imagery of airborne whales resonate with you as you consider your own life? What dreams feel weighty to you? What dreams feel ready to take flight?

- Oliver invites the reader to consider the encounter of nature as a spiritual one. Spiritual in the sense that it is beyond definition, barrier breaking in the realm of science and reason, embracing a force, an “original fire” within everything. Oliver does this subtly by calling out the fallibility of religious texts themselves, like the Bible. She says, “like the myth of the fifth morning galloping out of darkness, pouring heavenward.” This references the fifth day of creation found in Genesis 1:20-21²⁹ where God said, “Let the waters swarm with living things, and let birds fly above the earth up in the dome of the sky.” God created the great sea animals and all the tiny living things that swarm in the waters, each according to its kind, and all the winged birds, each according to its kind.” Oliver’s attention to the wonder and awe of humpback whales calls this origin story into question and suggests that even the most highly regarded texts are not to be held as inerrant.
 - What origin stories have you been taught?
 - What in your lived experience resonates as spiritual?
 - How do these two fall in sync or in dissonance?
 - Rewrite Genesis 1:20-21 with these questions as your fodder.
 - Note that this and other passages from Genesis are also relevant for understanding Merwin’s “For a Coming Extinction,” with its reference to humans priding themselves on being made *first*, before other species, and the danger caused to the rest of God’s Creation by humans’ obsession with exercising “dominion” (another word from the standard translation of Genesis) over all the other beings of that world (including grey whales).

²⁸ <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/humpback-whale>

²⁹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+1%3A20-23&version=CEB>

- The Stellwagen Marine Sanctuary is referenced in this poem. It is a place “near an urban world, that sits east of Boston, Massachusetts between Cape Ann and Cape Cod.”³⁰ This is a federally protected area that is home to a variety of thriving marine life, including the endangered species of humpbacks.
 - What do you think Oliver thought of sanctuaries? How do you imagine she might navigate a deep belief in a sacred earth and the reality of endangered species?
 - If Oliver is calling us to curate the Earth as a place that is cared for, revered as sacred, and ours for the shaping—what work is to be done to afford an unbounded sanctuary for all?

³⁰ <https://stellwagen.noaa.gov/>