



The 23rd-Century Nature Poem

by [Greg Wrenn](#)

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*"I consider'd long and seriously of you before you
were born."*

—Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

We live in a dying world of immeasurable beauty.

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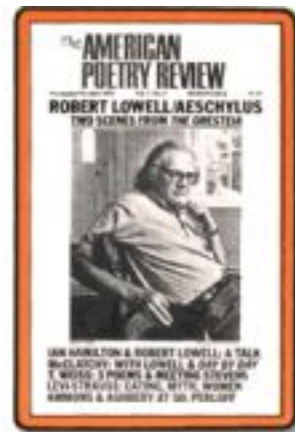
Poetry and the environmental crisis intersect at a question:
what's it like to abide with beauty that one is indirectly,
unintentionally destroying?

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I surface. It's the end of the dusk dive. I inflate my buoyancy vest and, while waiting for the others to ascend, float on my back like an obese otter, off a small fishing village in East Timor called Adara. Blending in my ear "avatar" and "adore," it's a name—noble, otherworldly—that I'd give to the daughter I'll never have. The ocean is calm. So many stars stud the moonless, cloudless sky that I have to close my eyes. I imagine I'm a radio-receiving dish, like the ones used by SETI to scan for extraterrestrial signals, and then hear an old meditation teacher in my mind say one word: receptivity. It affects me like the smell of a shirt just out of the dryer—I relax, I pay attention. There's nothing to do, no one to become, she reassures me, in the sometimes-useful platitudes of a mindfulness retreat. Floating here, I'm craving awe, self-forgetting; meanwhile I imagine table coral dissolving in the acidified oceans of 2065. Wonder if there's a box jellyfish beside me or new OkCupid messages in my inbox. I calculate my debts, worry about my sick father, who recently had a tumor removed from his gut. Have I forgotten to turn off my dive torch? I'm stuck in negative incapability, First-World neuroses. This is not transcendental. Ego persists. We have promises to keep.

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Like any other bearded, navel-gazing backpacker with an MFA, I've been reading the Transcendentalists this summer, sometimes just before gearing up and entering the water to dive. In the first section of "Nature," Emerson writes, "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and



preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown." What if once a century the moon, huge and golden on the horizon, showed itself for an hour then disappeared?

Things taken for granted, by definition, tend not to be experienced as beautiful—true beauty, the sort that makes us literally tremble, is always fleeting and therefore precious. What follows naturally, unstoppably, is the impulse to praise and record that thing of beauty, which is decidedly not a joy forever. For Shakespeare's male beloved in the first 126 sonnets, time itself "doth transfix the flourish set on youth / And delves the parallels in beauty's brow, / Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth." Shakespeare isn't the one gouging wrinkles into the Fair Youth's forehead. Biological existence in four dimensions means decay. But for our oceans, "the main of light," its current degradation is not part of some inevitable aging process. It is "anthropogenic," as the scientific euphemism goes. We cause a dead zone—the size of Connecticut—near the Mississippi Delta. We have destroyed half of the world's coral reefs in the past thirty years.

Such a rapid decline in the oceans, along with the peculiar temporal and physiological constraints of scuba diving, has made coral reefs very special to me. Each dive is brief: nitrogen builds up in the blood; the steel tank only holds so much air. It's expensive. So too is civilization's current mode of existence expensive and increasingly precarious. One afternoon in the waters off Madang, Papua New Guinea, an enormous swath of scroll coral, riddled with yellow-purple fairy basslets, astounded me, though the big fish that made these waters famous aren't here. Sulfuric acid from the nearby Basamak Refinery, the worried locals told me, is slowly poisoning Astrolabe Bay. And any day fishermen might dynamite sections of the reef. They'd be looking to feed their communities, aspiring to the kind of high-consumption lifestyle that we enjoy in the developed world. Such a fishing method, common in the African and Asian tropics, ruptures the swim bladders of fish and leaves sections of slow-growing reef in ruins.

Even at legally protected reefs in Indonesia, I have seen the dead fish, the ominous rubble. Also blown to bits are peacock-colored squid—bejeweled with lapis and turquoise because of a symbiotic relationship with bioluminescent bacteria—at the base of massive, centuries-old brain coral; wobbegong sharks, carpeted with tawny tassels and whiskers; olive sea snakes, with lungs instead of gills, peering into my mask then swimming up ninety feet to breathe air; potato cod as big as my sofa; three hundred bigeye trevally drifting in a channel, silvery as mica, resolute as sentries; acres of staghorn coral that give way to seagrass, where a hawksbill turtle rests. At Osprey Reef off the Great Barrier Reef, one alcove of purple coral and red anemones had me trying to kneel, embarrassed, in the sand to pray. There wasn't enough weight in my belt, and I began to float away, my palms unclasping.

These creatures, not just vivid language, were alive in my presence, and they face potential extinction before my generation begins to collect what will be left of Social Security. As Charlie Veron, the world's expert on coral, has said, "There is no hope of reefs surviving to even midcentury in any form that we now recognize ... as reefs fail so will other ecosystems. This is the path of a mass extinction event, when most life, especially tropical marine life, goes extinct." It's all the more heartbreaking and morally vexing because we could prevent such a loss.

This urgency—as well as the astonishing splendor—has led me for over twenty-five years to the earth's coral reefs. All the while I've been trying to write, even at eleven

when I snorkeled the urchin-infested jetties of Panama City Beach, Florida, less than a five-hour drive from my hometown. As a poet breathing compressed air underwater, I've encountered natural beauty while believing—knowing—that as the ocean this century continues to warm, rise, and acidify, reef ecosystems will largely crumble away. The Chinese build two new coal-fired powerplants a week. The United States won't sign the Kyoto Protocol. My car emits per mile a half-pound of CO₂; I wouldn't even want to calculate the hundreds of tons of carbon that my trips abroad have released. About a third of the released carbon is absorbed into the oceans, creating more H⁺ ions in naturally alkaline seawater and thereby increasing its acidity to levels not seen in 300 million years. Calcium carbonate, in the form of aragonite, becomes increasingly harder for zooplankton, coral, and mollusks to produce for their shells, and the food web begins to further unravel.

Given this context, I'm increasingly turning away from a certain kind of poetry that idealizes the natural world while photoshopping out any hint of our current crisis. Such poems may no longer be defensible. They might be Beauty, but they aren't also Truth—are they perhaps pretty fabrications, ones with life-and-death consequences? Is the very core of them hollow because their speakers won't even begin to turn inward to acknowledge the trashing of a planet? For artists, I tend to think that representationally what was tenable—politically, socioeconomically, environmentally—before the globalized carbon economy of over seven billion people is no longer so. I don't mean remotely to suggest that the nature poetry of previous centuries is an imaginative failure or a distraction; but given our current situation, for poets writing today it cannot be business as usual. Like the Norwegian doomsday seed vault on an Arctic island, such poems by the likes of Wordsworth, Longfellow, and Shelley preserve an innocent ecopoetics to which we wish we could return.

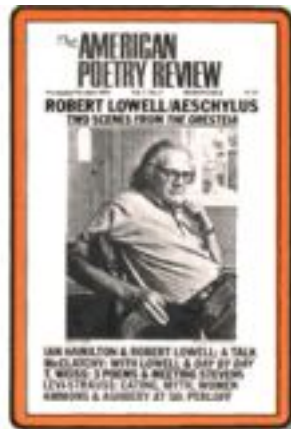
William Blake breathed air with only 290 parts per million of CO₂. So did the British Empire's tigers. The tetrameter lines of Blake's "The Tyger" conjure not only that animal stalking its prey but also the divine (or infernal) forge of its Creator:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

When *Songs of Experience* was published in 1794, tigers were common throughout Asia. Today there are only 3,200 remaining "[i]n the forests of the night," and it is very mortal hands and eyes, through land clearing and hunting, who are responsible for their decimation. We're the apex predator with "fearful symmetry," and no "immortal" being, no avatar, is going come down to save that big cat species or ours from extinction. Though anachronistic, this very twenty-first-century and privileged (an Indian peasant deep in debt could earn a fortune from selling just one tiger paw) interpretation of Blake's poem is one I can't help but make—the speaker, after all, addresses what's now a critically endangered animal while meditating on the problem of evil, a philosophical question not unrelated to the climate crisis. Like Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, ultimately his poem is about the essential violence and chaos of life, whether that creature be terrorist or Venus fly trap, Tiger Mom or Bengal tiger. "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?": if Homo sapiens were to ask itself that question in some collective bathroom mirror—after having killed off baiji white dolphins, giant lemurs, and Steller's sea cows, after genocides by the likes of North American colonists, Pol Pot, Hitler, and Saddam Hussein—it would have to be with more than a little irony.

Might it be enough to praise, to simply let the experience of natural beauty deeply affect, perhaps even transform, poet and reader? A nature poet like Mary Oliver—a passionate observer of starfish, hermit crabs, and humpback whales, best-selling but not drawn to "politics"—would say yes. Or, now that we've recently hit 400 ppm of CO₂, could the nature poems of 2014 and 2275 reflect not only beauty and rapture but also blame-worthiness and grief?

The sort of poetry that I'm wanting to write praises nature while on some level mourning the passing of entire species and ecosystems, not just individual creatures. It need not be polemical, as Robinson Jeffers is when he declares, "It is easy to know the beauty of inhuman things, sea, storm, and mountain ... / Humanity has its lesser beauty, impure and painful; we have to harden our hearts to bear it." It need not be sentimental, like William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark," in which the speaker, who finds a dead deer, "could hear the wilderness listen" and thinks "hard for us all." It might be much more subtle, as in Katie Ford's "Colosseum": "Somewhere unseen / the ocean deepened then and now / into more ocean ... / the bony fish obscuring / its bottommost floor, carcasses of mollusks / settling, casting one last blur of sand, / unable to close again." Or marked by revelatory bathos, as in D. A. Powell's "chronic": "in a protracted stillness, I saw that heron I didn't wish to disturb / was clearly a white sack caught in the redbud's limbs // I did not comprehend desire as a deadly force until— / daylight don't leave me now."



Or it might speak from an imaginary though quite plausible future when *Manta birostris* is extinct—months after seeing manta rays for the first time in the cool waters of Komodo National Park, hearing a late middle-aged version of myself speaking to his beloved, I wrote:

remember the manta winging into the tide?

between two
scrubby islands

slashes of gills pulsing on underbelly

head fins reaching out past
eyes to guide
plankton toward

its open mouth nothing to prove
gliding
gliding

Three or four of these huge cartilaginous fish, ten feet from wingtip to wingtip, hovered in swift currents to feed, slightly flapping their wings to remain in place. They seemed to me the embodiment of effortlessness and surrender and resolve, qualities that can lessen the fearful ambivalence I've always felt in romantic love. Indeed, addressing a lover whose love is terrifying in its purity and intensity, the speaker in my poem ends up identifying with the manta ray, asking "this fear of love's drift-net / will it ever die down?"

Literal drift nets—as well as other irresponsible fishing practices—cause large but unknown numbers of manta deaths per year, in addition to the senseless targeted hunting of them for traditional Chinese medicine: the rakers inside the "slashes of gills pulsing" are bogusly peddled as an immune booster and cancer cure. What I know first-hand: that morning, in the protected waters between Gili Lawa Laut and Gili Lawa, while I held on to a slimy rock, I watched an animal fed. Such an ordinary act on this planet. Yet it was—this is a word we'd like to utter in this century and actually mean it—majestic. Unlike, say, watching my now-deceased greyhound Cupid eat ground venison from a bowl. The sadness in his eyes never ceased. Though I suspected he was mistreated on the racetrack, I never imagined his slaughter or the extinction of his breed. I didn't see him as a symbol for the man I wanted to become. Even so, that dog and that manta's atoms were together with ours in the infinitely dense Big Bang singularity. We were together and then we weren't.

This summer I had an even more extraordinary encounter in West Papua's Dampier Strait, at a dive site called Manta Sandy. The eight of us kneeled side-by-side in the sand at fifty feet, forming a wall of bubbles, and waited. Garden eels shyly poked their heads out of their holes and fed on drifting plankton—but I had seen them many, many times before. Goatfish flicked their forked whiskers into the sand looking for buried invertebrates—I might as well have been watching a squirrel nosing around for acorns in a park. I tried to get interested in a tiny pipefish, dusky-colored with faded white bands, that darted its concerned seahorse eyes around as I peered into them, the equivalent of King Kong looking into a skyscraper window—but my regulator was irritating my gums; my right foot was cramping. Kneeling there for twenty minutes, I was beginning to think the dive was hopeless.

Then one manta, and then another, appeared in the distance and glided towards us, swooping above a huge coral head like a pelican passing at an angle over a navigational buoy. Butterflyfish, damsels, and wrasses rushed up to the mantas' white undersides, speckled with black markings, to eat the parasites there. The two rays were here not to feed but to be cleaned, and perhaps to communicate—in fact, these creatures have the highest brain/body ratio of any fish, and preliminary experiments suggest a capacity to recognize themselves in mirrors. Before moving on to another huge coral head, they somersaulted beside one another, soaring.

At a certain point while transfixed on the ocean floor, I began to spontaneously recite fragments of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover"—"I caught this morning morning's minion ... dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon ... the rolling level underneath him steady air"—and underneath my three-millimeter wetsuit my limbs were gooseflesh. As was my scalp. Hopkins, far too skittish and frail to have been anyone's dive buddy, would have called this instress: the expression of the manta's unique divine DNA, its cosmic distinctiveness, its inscape. I called it inspiration, though I didn't know where it would take me. Then I remembered an article that I had read online about Indonesia's Tanjung Luar market, notorious for selling spinner dolphins—hauled in on poles like pigs about to be roasted—as shark bait. Amid the text at one point was a photograph of several dead manta rays laid out on the concrete floor. Each one's huge triangular wings had been sliced off and placed beside the main body. . So neatly laid out and carved up were the mantas that they resembled a squadron of charcoal-gray stealth bombers seen from above in a vast assembly plant, wings beside fuselages. After the gills are removed, some of the remaining cartilage is sold as cheap filler for shark-fin soup in Asia.

As Hopkins writes in his journal about an ash tree cut down in his garden, "I heard

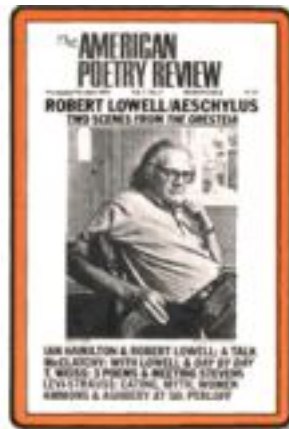
the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more." As I watched the mantas soaring in the "dapple-dawn-drawn" water at 7:30 a.m., I could hear—in the recesses of my mind—a ray slapping its fins on a fiberglass deck, a club bashing the brain and head fins, then a machete slicing off its wings. And I felt a sensation similar to when I was nine and a baseball hit my thumb as I swung a bat. An uncanny wave of pain and sadness and fear, my own "great pang," ran down the Lycra length of me. I could feel it down to my flipper-encased feet.

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In that moment, why didn't I wish to die?

* * *

My hybrid is white and dirty. It's parked on the street near my apartment, in an area so "liberal" that showing up at the checkout line without cloth bags could result in sneers or worse. The car will sit there all weekend—I feel too guilty to drive. With every mile driven, a half-pound of trigonal, covalently-bonded molecules is spewed out, infinitesimally nudging up the average global temperature with an unknown time lag. By how many nanoseconds does each mile accelerate the melting of Kilimanjaro's glaciers, the inundation of Battery Park and Tuvalu and the Niger Delta, the acidification of the Coral Sea so that the Great Barrier Reef is just a memory?



But when I commute to and from Palo Alto on a dangerously narrow freeway, my Honda gets close to fifty miles per gallon, which at first made me feel good. I bought it used from a grouchy Jamaican salesman, and my partner at the time did his best to be happy for me, even though he was a devoted biker who for ethical reasons vowed never to own a car. I did my best to make my purchase seem sweeter, less threatening: I draped a juniper rosary, which Navajos hang from cribs to protect infants from nightmares, around the rearview mirror; on long car trips Fleet Foxes and Andrew Bird played on the stereo when I'd rather have listened to Dolly Parton; and, trying to associate it with cuddly, sweet pastoralism and rebirth instead of an apocalypse, I christened the car Lambcake, after the traditional sheep-shaped Easter cakes, a name that made us both giggle. For him and for me, it looked as if I had successfully rebranded the \$17,000 arrangement of metal, which annually lets out nine concert grand pianos' worth of CO₂, as cute, innocent.

But then at a birthday party in downtown Oakland I referred to Lambcake as "our" car in front of a mutual acquaintance. "That's not ours," he told this person sternly, his voice quavering uncharacteristically, "it's *his*." We were living together at the time and drove Lambcake to run errands or to go up into the Oakland Hills for hiking. I'd pick him up from spots to where he had biked, and after he'd put his two-wheeled vehicle into Lambcake's hatchback trunk, we'd speed off together. He offered to pay, based on his use, for part of my car insurance and gas. So his correction of my pronoun choice took me aback, and I took it personally. But in retrospect, his reaction wasn't an attack on our relationship or me—it was a political and moral reflex with which many of my generation, who instinctively understand that we're on a dying world, can empathize. Often—almost always—civilization is in denial that in order to live in this world today, we must burn carbon. Of course my partner was

embarrassed to be named publicly as an accomplice to "climate change"—a name that is, to put it politely, an understatement. Given that our species is responsible for what should instead be called catastrophic planetary warming, melting, and flooding, how can I blame his defensiveness? Even if we only walk, we're all accomplices.

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As Scott Russell Sanders remarks about the environmental crisis in "Near and Distant Bears": "We will not have thousands of generations to work out solutions; we must do so within the lifetime of a child born today ... we will need to re-imagine our place in nature, our responsibilities as members of communities, and the meaning of a good life—which is to say, we will require a shift in consciousness as radical as any mutation in our evolutionary history." That shift, that mutation, has to be as momentous as humanity learning to make fire or developing spoken language. It would have to involve a hyper-expansion of our capacity for empathy, not just with loved ones or the animals at the local pet shelter or strangers across a table, but across continents and centuries. With a communal mind's eye of stereoscopic vision, we would need to imagine the suffering of the voiceless, the powerless, the unborn: those much less insulated, because of wealth, privilege, or circumstance, from the effects of an overheating, flooding planet.

Perhaps it could be said that our civilization is an imaginative failure: it hasn't conceived yet in an eidetic and therefore transformative way the consequences of its actions and inactions. For instance, what will daily life be like for the tens of millions of Bangladeshi refugees after rising sea levels flood a good part of their nation? If world leaders could imagine, in a blindingly vivid and embodied way, the *felt sense* of even a moment as such a refugee, would global environmental policy change? Can seven—or eight or ten—billion human brains undertake such a communal imaginative act and then act decisively to drastically reduce carbon emissions and quickly develop and implement carbon sequestration technology? Are those billions of beings willing to make the necessary economic and social sacrifices along the way?

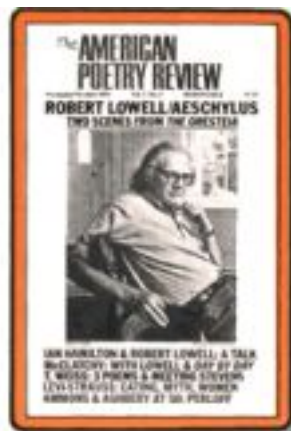
As a species—not just as poets and readers, or as Americans and Chinese—we must be able manifest the visionary spirit of Whitman in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," who says, "What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us? // And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose." The "you" here could be a redwood tree in 2108 that is drying out because fog appears too infrequently along the California coast; or an eight-year-old boy in 2279 whose mother tells him the last wild orca has starved, and he begins to write a poem. The evolutionary quantum leap that must come soon this century would allow us to make choices with the entire biosphere in mind, present and future, resensitizing ourselves to ecological pain and human suffering so that they are no longer abstractions. What kind of songs will the nature poems of the 23rd century be? And could we bear to hear them?

Human nature itself has to change. Compassionate choices that delay gratification need to provide more of a dopamine hit than compulsive, convenient consumption and pleasure-seeking. It is as if the monolith itself from *2001: A Space Odyssey* needs to descend to the earth—not to give apes the ability to use tools and wage war, but to give us a new human nature, one that inclines to take the long-view, that shares rather than hoards, lets go instead of holds on; that works to care for its unborn great-great-grandchildren as lovingly as it does its living children. Compared to the

latter outlook, my approach to life is positively Neanderthal, analogous to asking a toddler to solve a differential equation. Often I've wished, in vain, to be transformed, transfigured, as a brain, body, and soul. Individual species-wide transformation—there is no app for that. There are miles to go before we sleep.

* * *

Still floating on my back off Adara, I open my eyes to constellations I don't recognize, a quartz macadam stretch of Milky Way my eyes have never traveled. It is an alien sky. It is a new sky, magnificent. I take it in, trying not to compulsively connect these pinpricks of light into new monsters and heroes.



On clear Friday nights in northeast Florida when I felt alone and shameful, when my parents were arguing in the garaged car, the Southern Hemisphere's stars never comforted me. Instead it was the Queen's empty throne and the blue-tinged white star in one corner of the Lyre. The Orion Nebula's wisps glowed through my mail-order telescope. As I grew older, though, I stopped seeing them. They became celestial television snow. Light pollution increased. Wonder was an idea, not an experience.

Now I stir the lagoon's water around me, and my dive buddy surfaces. Bioluminescent plankton, greenish-blue star systems and galaxies, flicker on and off, swirl. I exhale. I cough.

It is truly night. We return to shore.

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About the Author

Greg Wrenn's first book of poems, *Centaur*, was awarded the 2013 Brittingham Prize. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New England Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Yale Review*, and elsewhere. A former Wallace Stegner Fellow and a recipient of the Lyric Poetry Award from the Poetry Society of America, he was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida, and received a BA from Harvard University and an MFA from Washington University in St. Louis.

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