

GUEST ESSAY

How to Breathe With the Trees

April 1, 2024



By [Margaret Renkl](#)

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

Even on a computer screen, Ada Limón, who is serving her second term as poet laureate of the United States, projects such warmth and reassurance that you could almost swear she was sitting beside you, holding your hand. This kind of connection between strangers, human heart to human heart, is so rare as to be startling, especially these days.

April is National Poetry Month, and it strikes me that no one is better positioned than Ms. Limón to convince Americans to leave off their quarrels and worries, at least for a time, and surrender to the language of poetry. That's as much because of her public presence as because of her public role as the country's poet in chief. When Ada Limón tells you that poetry will make you feel better, you believe her.

In her nearly weekly travels as poet laureate, Ms. Limón has had a lot of practice delivering this message. "Every time I'm around a group of people, the word that keeps coming up is 'overwhelmed,'" she said. "It's so meaningful to lean on poetry right now because it does make you slow down. It does make you breathe."

A poem is built of rests. Each line break, each stanza break and each caesura represents a pause, and in that pause there is room to take a breath. To ponder. To sit, for once in our lives, with mystery. If we can't find a way to slow down on our own, to take a breath, poems can teach us how.

But Ms. Limón isn't merely an ambassador for how poetry can heal *us*. She also makes a subtle but powerful case for how poetry can heal the earth itself. At this time of crisis, when worry governs our days, she wants us to look up from our screens and consider our own connection to the earth. To remember how to breathe by spending some time with the trees that breathe with us.

A changing climate, a changing world

Card 1 of 4

Climate change around the world: In [“Postcards From a World on Fire,”](#) 193 stories from individual countries show how climate change is reshaping reality everywhere, from dying coral reefs in Fiji to disappearing oases in Morocco and far, far beyond.

The role of our leaders: Writing at the end of 2020, Al Gore, the 45th vice president of the United States, [found reasons for optimism](#) in the Biden presidency, a feeling perhaps borne out by the passing of [major climate legislation](#). That doesn’t mean there haven’t been criticisms. For example, Charles Harvey and Kurt House argue that [subsidies for climate capture technology](#) will ultimately be a waste.

The worst climate risks, mapped: In this feature, [select a country](#), and we’ll break down the climate hazards it faces. In [the case of America](#), our maps, developed with experts, show where extreme heat is causing the most deaths.

What people can do: Justin Gillis and Hal Harvey describe [the types of local activism](#) that might be needed, while Saul Griffith points to how [Australia shows the way on rooftop solar](#). Meanwhile, small [changes at the office](#) might be one good way to cut significant emissions, writes Carlos Gamarra.

In the United States, about half of poets laureate spend their terms developing a signature project that fosters a greater appreciation of poetry. Ms. Limón has two: [“You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World,”](#) an anthology of nature poetry that will be released on Tuesday; and [“You Are Here: Poetry in the Parks,”](#) a series of poetry-centered picnic-table-style installations in seven national parks. Each will be inscribed with the words of a poet associated with that landscape and also with a writing prompt designed to nudge readers to try their own hands at making a poem. These initiatives will be [formally introduced on Thursday](#) at the Library of Congress in conjunction with the library’s inaugural Mary Oliver Memorial Event.

Whether sweeping and magnificent or nearly microscopic — a majestic national park vista, say, or an ant colony’s communal effort to save its own inadvertently uncovered eggs — the natural world has always been a catalyst for lyricism. “There’s a reason why people go to these incredible natural landscapes and think, ‘I have no words,’” Ms. Limón said. “And yet the poets, we love to see if we can figure out some words: ‘Let’s see if we can name that kind of wonder, that kind of awe.’”

The connection between the beauty of the world and the beauty of the language is more crucial now than it has ever been. In its intimacy, its revelation not just of nature but also of the perceiving self, nature poems offer one of the few paths we have to consider the risks to the natural world in a way that is free of partisan rancor.

Those risks are foremost in Ms. Limón’s mind. In considering what her signature project as poet laureate would be, the thought that came to her was both small and impossibly huge: “I just want us all to write poems and save the planet,” she writes in the introduction to “You Are Here.”

Editors' Picks

“We all have nature poems within us — every single one of us,” Ms. Limón said when I asked her about this statement. “I wanted to have a book that not only allowed us to think of many different ways that nature poems can exist and move in the world, but also give people permission to write their own nature poems and think about it in a different way.”

“You Are Here” is an anthology of nature poems by 50 of the most accomplished poets working today, including the PEN/Voelcker Award winner Rigoberto González, the former U.S. poet laureate Joy Harjo, the Pulitzer Prize winner Diane Seuss and the Kingsley Tufts Award winner Patricia Smith, among many others who have won national awards for their work. “I just asked for these original poems, like, ‘Will you make this poem that speaks back to the natural world, whatever that means to you?’” Ms. Limón said.

The poems she got in response represent a great diversity of poetic voices and forms, and also a diversity of natural landscapes. If your idea of nature poetry is, as Ms. Limón said only half-jokingly, “a young gentleman walking to a mountain and having an epiphany,” this anthology will put that notion to rest.

Whoever you are, you will find yourself and your own world in the expansiveness of this collection. Even in the specificity of each poet’s own inimitable experience, you will find your own voice and your own perceiving self, for the natural world includes us and enfolds us all. Nature can be found on a mountain, yes, but it can also be found on a city stoop. Or in a drainage ditch. Or in the sky above a prison yard. Wherever we are, that is where the natural world is, too. It is there. We just have to notice it.

Writing a poem might seem like the least practical way imaginable to address melting glaciers, bleaching coral, drought, pollution and the like, never mind the overarching catastrophes of climate change and mass extinction. What can language do to save us now? What can something so small as a poem possibly do to save us now?

The answer lies in poetry’s great intimacy, its invitation to breathe together. We read a poem, and we take a breath each time the poet takes a breath. We read a nature poem, and we take a breath with the trees. When the trees — and the birds and the clouds and the ants and even the bats and the rat snakes — become a part of us, too, maybe that’s when we will finally begin to care enough to save them.