

## Honoring the Earth: Presentation to the UCCSJS 11/27/11

by: Penny Harter

Every time I look at the beautiful hanging on the wall behind me, I think it depicts a planet, probably our Earth. We are living on a planet. Amazing! And when I gaze out these wonderful windows all around us into the trees and sky, I feel that we are one with both. We are already sitting in the sky.

I first became aware of miracle of planets and stars in second or third grade after my father had told me that Earth was in a solar system, and tried to explain what that meant. I got in trouble the next day in class because I couldn't contain this revelation. We had those desks whose tops were hinged and lifted to allow us to access our books and materials. Well, I was sitting next to Donald, my current crush, and I wanted to gift him with this stupendous piece of new information. Innocent as I was, I figured that if I raised my desk and Donald raised his, I could tell him about the planets and the teacher wouldn't see us. Wrong! And I'll never know what she thought when I answered her query about what we were talking about with "the planets"

In 4th grade we moved to Clark Township NJ, still a very rural area then. There were cows at the school bus stop, marshy fields and apple orchards beyond the creek behind my yard, and woods to the right of my house as one faced it that went on for several miles. In those days, either the world was different or my mother was more trusting than I was when my children were small, and than my daughter and I are now about my grandchildren. I spent many a long summer day roaming that orchard, lying on my tummy by the creek watching tadpoles and turtles, or exploring much of the woods. Here's a poem recapturing the joyful innocence of that time:

### **Tapestry**

Deer prints in the creek mud,  
rotting apples underfoot in the orchard  
out back, and the field of marsh grass  
between the orchard and my yard—  
its meanders humming with the hot buzz  
of summer—these were home.

I ran barefoot between the orchard rows  
where once the farmer's cows were free  
to roam and munch, then crouched  
among the matted weeds, inhaling  
scents of rank and rancid fruit  
among the drunken wasps.

Other days I lay down in the valleys  
my body hollowed in the yellow field—  
my breasts budding against the bent grass  
and my warm legs teased by grasshoppers  
whirring around me.

It was all one then, even the tadpoles  
wiggling in the creek like quicksilver,  
the small brown turtles, and the silky  
gray clay from the creek's banks  
that I squeezed through my fingers  
as my child hands shaped it  
into everything.

Maybe because of that childhood immersion in nature, or maybe because of the impact of learning we live on a planet, or maybe because I am 1/16th Carolina Cherokee (though that sure isn't much), I have always been attuned to the natural world—to our planet Earth, both around us and as an integral part of the larger miracle of the cosmos.

I have written many poems that either witness the damage we humans have done and continue to do to our planet and to those species—animal, vegetable and mineral—who share it with us, or poems that praise the gifts that surround us—our experiences of earth, air, fire and water—and our bond with them; poems for (and from) the Earth—for its plants, stones, mountains, lakes, seas and skies, and for “all our relations” — members of the species with whom we share it.

I have also felt compelled to write poems that celebrate Earth's place in the cosmos—its relation to the whole, as far as we begin to understand the whole.

In the Preface to my book *Lizard Light: Poems from the Earth*, much of which was written in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the beauties of the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rockies, I say the following:

“I have written these poems in response to Earth's geological and evolutionary history, its place in the cosmos, and our place as part of the whole. The sky, the horizon, and the mountains of Santa Fe have given my spirit a place to grow. I am consistently aware that we are on a planet, and that it is alive.

It is time to write poems that go beyond the personal, poems that speak for the Earth and its inhabitants in a time of great vulnerability for all species, and for the planet itself. We need poems that speak of universal concerns and point out that all beings exist as integral and interconnected parts of the larger community of the universe, poems that affirm. . . and confirm our mutual responsibility to the Earth.”

Although many of the poems I want to share with you will celebrate the miracle of our being on this planet, I'd like to start with a few poems that grieve the ways in which either our mindless or deliberate behavior has damaged the Earth, its other inhabitants, and even ourselves:

In January, 2011, while enjoying the beauties of the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Amherst, Virginia, I found myself contemplating what the consequences might be if we continue on our course leading to extinctions of various species (including, possibly, ourselves) by contributing to global warming as we release toxins into the environment. Here are two poems I wrote there that capture that concern.

In the first, "Mid-January Dream of the World Without Us", I allowed myself hope that even if we were no longer here, some species might survive after the damage healed:

### **Mid-January Dream of the World Without Us**

On the greening grass, two scarlet leaves, fused  
by a smudge of leaf-mold at center, glisten with  
a trace of last night's rain.

In the cerulean sky, more clear than we remember,  
the sun bathes the Earth—announcing nearby star,  
provider of all life.

We were negligent—foolish not to contemplate  
the heavens more often, or cherish fallen leaves  
in the ready chalice of our palms.

Now a skein of blackbirds wheels and wheels  
far above the naked trees—a single bird-mind  
flinging it against the plum horizon.

And water cycles through the clouds and seas,  
feeding forest life and fallow fields, carving  
canyons in ancestral hills.

These have all endured, though we are done—  
these, and whatever else survived our blind  
meddling in their communal lives; survived

our hubris in believing we alone were destined  
to inherit the Earth and the fullness thereof—  
we who now have lost the primordial garden.

Then, when I found myself admiring the Virginia forested mountains, I remembered the contrast to them I'd witnessed when flying over clear-cut summits in the Pacific Northwest. At that time, I wrote "Rainforest Slash and Burn." Of course, I was also thinking about the worldwide destruction of the rainforests which continues to proceed at an alarming rate. Not only are unknown species threatened, but also sources of probable medical remedies that we will never discover are being destroyed.

### **Rainforest Slash and Burn**

Fallen across one another,  
the bodies of these trees  
tangle in a mass grave.  
What is left behind  
lies broken on cracked dirt,  
thin trunks and branches  
bleaching in the unfamiliar sun.

Here and there a few,  
too young and spindly  
to be of use, still stand,  
their sparse leafed crowns  
no longer woven into canopy,  
no longer holding birds.

Farther up the hill, blackened trunks  
the rancher burned stand guard  
like tombstones, while the wind  
scatters ashes across soil  
so dead that even its insects  
have abandoned it.

Pick your way through this boneyard.  
Feel the dead limbs snap  
beneath your weight;  
see how some of them  
are shaped like animals  
we will never meet.

And of course, we are not the only species who will suffer dire consequences if we don't wake up to our responsibility to the Earth. Here is a poem about one of the challenges polar bears are facing. Some years ago, I picked up a white stone from the beach, and the more I looked at it, the more it looked like the shape of a polar bear's head. Then I saw a documentary on TV about the threats the bears face, so I wrote the following:

## White Stone

The mother polar bear lies down in snow  
and waits for more to cover her before  
she will give birth.

Even in spring, food on the tundra is scarce.  
Come autumn, she will lead her one  
surviving cub to the Arctic shore and wait  
a long time for the sea to freeze before  
she can teach him to hunt seal.

I am stroking a smooth white stone  
found on some forgotten strand.  
Sloped like a bear skull, it eyes me  
from a rusty indentation in its side.

Caressing it, my thumb finds a cub  
stretched out dead on the shore,  
having swum with his mother

too far—broken ice, no seals, no land,  
bad storm—until drowning,  
he washed up here to lie on his side,  
mouth permanently open.

And I'll close this section of poems that "witness" for the Earth with a poem reflecting an amazing discovery I found in a photo caption in an issue of *"National Geographic"*. How amazing that the bacteria protect their host and, at the same time, correspond with light shining from our sun and moon. But since I repeatedly "know" that it's all one, part of me feels, "Of course!"

## **Symbiosis**

The Hawaiian bobtail squid  
forages in the night surf  
while waves of moonlight, of starlight  
fall like sediment into the sea.

Its globular eyes pulse green;  
its spotted body glows  
orange, brown and blue.

Smaller than my thumb,  
it is a galaxy, an organ  
of light inhabited by millions  
of luminescent bacteria.

In the abyss beneath these squid  
other nocturnal predators prow; yet they can not see the bobtails whose bacteria protect them, shining in the wavelength of the stars and of the moon.

What have we learned  
to do for the Earth  
that means as much?

~~~~~

And now, I'd like to share several poems that celebrate the beauties of this old planet:

First, when I read about the "dream-time" of the Australian aboriginal peoples, it helped me define why I was writing poems for, and hopefully from, the Earth. I explored that revelation when writing the following poem, "Dream Time."

## Dream Time

*In Australia the totemic Ancestors walked across the land leaving words and musical notes in their footprints. The aboriginals read the country as a musical score.*

In the Dream Time,  
the Ancestors went underground,  
Honey-Ant here, Wallaby there,  
after their magic feet  
had planted song in the dust,

and by these songs, the people  
learned each totem path,  
singing the holy hillock, sacred spring,  
and burning bush of their clan;  
mapping kinship where the tongue shifted  
but the song continued,  
humming up from the underworld  
like the first rivers.

When I listen to the whales  
calling deep sea currents alive,  
their repeating melodies answered  
across great distances;  
when I hear the wolves, the birds—  
all the tribes descended from the Ancestors  
learning the planet by ear,  
defining it by song  
as the wind does each tree,  
I do what I can,  
throwing this song out from my house  
like a rope in search of water  
through the fire.

And here are some poems that reflect my joy in the land, sea, and sky we share, and how much we are a part of them—of the Earth and of the cosmos. In the following poem I hoped to express our being part of the Earth. Reminds me of the song the choir sang a few weeks ago: "I Am a River".

## **Asleep, You Are a River**

Asleep, you are a river  
face rippling over stones  
legs drifting like branches  
torso heaving currents.

When you stretch your arms upward  
you call tributaries home,  
breed clouds from your fingertips.

Even your breathing  
is a long journey  
to the sea.

~~~

Speaking of the sea, on a summer beach walk at dawn not that many years ago, Bill and I saw dolphins leaping offshore at Ship Bottom on Long Beach Island (a barrier island), New Jersey. And since we are all reconstituted atoms from the first stars, I felt the connection while writing this poem. Before writing it, I had to research just how dolphins sleep.

## **Atlantic Dolphins**

Dolphins leap in the dawn,  
their silver backs shedding  
sparks of foam, their rhythm  
a heartbeat beyond the breakers.  
Welcoming the sun,  
they raise salt into the wind  
as they follow schools of fish  
into the morning.

Tonight when they rest in the swells,  
swimming with half-closed eyes,  
blowholes open to the air,  
they will listen for one another  
and for the turning Earth  
whose moon sounds the tides  
that rock them;  
and perhaps  
they will dream of the stars,  
pale phosphorescent ancestors  
whistling faintly to them  
from the distant currents  
of the sky.



~

In writing the following poem, "Returning," I again felt our integration into the whole. Upon death, we enter the Earth one way or another—flesh or ashes—and merge with it, our atoms recycling into all that is. In fact, my most recent book of poems working through my grief after my husband Bill's death acknowledges that fact in its title: *Recycling Starlight*.

### **Returning**

We migrate toward the spine  
of the Earth, our vertebrae  
singing the pitch of an axis  
blessed by swirling magma.

Our bones seek the center  
while our tendons bend again  
in stems and branches,  
and our skin stretches dirt.

On the horizon  
mountains wait for our hearts  
to join the others beating slowly  
inside stone,

and when deer come down  
to the shimmer of salt,  
they will taste our senses  
returning to the sea.

We need to remember that we, the very Earth and the species who share it with us are all luminous—if we only open the eyes of our hearts and spirits and celebrate what shines within and around us.

I will read to you now from Annie Dillard's book "*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*" for the account of seeing "the tree with the lights in it" on pp. 33-34. \*\* (read)

Here are four short poems in which I half-dreamed, half-remembered that light. I grew up in a house with three willow trees in the front yard, and there were also stray willows in the woods next to my house that stretched for several miles. It always struck me that among the first greens of spring are the almost neon new green of the willows. I still marvel at their brilliance.

In writing “Willow,” I was remembering that childhood joy at seeing the coming of spring in the woodland willow, its bright green shining among the just budding trees.

### **Willow**

The green window of the willow deep in the woods,  
shining from among the still bare trees,  
opens into the first sunlight  
so pure its branches singe the air,  
so bright that I remember living there.

~ ~ ~

When Bill and I lived in Santa Fe, there was a lilac bush outside our bedroom window. And, given less ground light than where we’d lived in NJ before our move, I felt moved to write the following.

### **The Night Sky**

When something taps your window  
in the dark—a large moth  
beating its pale wings,  
or a pungent branch of lilac  
scraping in the wind—  
you wake to the night sky  
pouring in upon you.

You have been waiting  
all your life for this,  
open as a harp.

And when a bird cries out  
from the depths of the lilac  
where it has slept every night  
undisturbed, you understand  
that it too has opened  
to a shining that sings.

~ ~ ~

Sometimes, my wish to comfort when hearing of a sad event prompts a poem. Before we left Santa Fe to return to New Jersey in 2002, but after I'd been hired to teach in a private parochial school upon our return, I learned of the sudden and unexpected death of a popular elementary student in the school I would be teaching in. I wrote the following as a tribute, hoping to offer some empathy to the community.

### **The Gravity of the Sacred**

Visible and invisible,  
it tethers us, wraps our limbs  
in radiant linen.

It beats in our chests,  
flares out to bless whatever  
gets in its way.

I have seen it leap across a field  
riding the wind from blade to blade  
until the grass grows dim again  
and lost.

Feel it knocking at your throat,  
wanting to speak in tongues  
about the light that even now  
is flaming in your flesh  
for a little while.

~~~

And when I was in residence at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts last January, I was so moved by the power of the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains, that I wrote the following—which also, I think, reflects my feelings of having been through the valley of losing Bill.

### **Some Nights**

Some nights I visit the mountains,  
called by the voice of the wind  
fluting through old growth forests,

and I find myself lying on the lip  
of a cliff, the night sky wedding me  
to stone, stars falling through me.

Some nights I lie there till dawn,  
becoming something other—some  
elemental animal of fire whose

memories flare and go out, leaving  
me like ashes that will wash down  
the rock face to earth.

Some say I only dream these  
mountains, that they are not real,  
and no beast born of fire can live.

I tell them I have been there,  
that the cliff bears the mold of  
my face, and that my flesh still

smolders with the light of dying  
stars, though it does not hurt to  
burn my way back home.

~\*~

Since “Tapestry”, the first poem I shared, reflected my rural childhood, I’d like to close my talk this morning with another poem that hearkens back to a childhood fantasy—one also written while I was at VCCA.

### **In That Far Haven**

In childhood, I often visited a village at twilight—  
a village twinkling in the gloaming sky, floating there  
like some far haven of the fae come down to bless us.

I was welcome then, invited to a feast set out on silver  
plates, and sat at table with the rest—cloaked like them  
in strange diaphanous and haloed flesh.

Mild-faced wolves, curled like faithful dogs at our feet,  
laid their silky heads upon our laps as we slipped them  
roasted scraps of a wild beast brought in from the dark

uncharted forests far beyond us. Some sacrament was being acted out in those hallowed rooms, some festive celebration of the bond between us all—and I, the guest,

craved to stay among their kind, to live forever in that sphere of light and laughter, drinking ambrosia with the ancient ones who'd come here long ago—ancestors of

earth, air, fire, water, who deign to come among us now and then, crossing the threshold of our mortal coil; who kindly let me join their festal rites—and taught me well.

As it says in our closing song, “We stand on holy ground”—everywhere and all the time. May we honor that fact by accepting the responsibility to care for the Earth, for one another, and for the whole “web of life”—of which we are privileged to be an integral part.

Thank you.

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**\*\*Credits:**

“Tapestry,” *Thatchwork*: Delaware Valley Poets.

“Rainforest Slash and Burn,” “Symbiosis,” “Atlantic Dolphins,” “Returning,” “The Night Sky,” *Lizard Light: Poems from the Earth*. Copyright © 1998. Sherman Asher Publishing.

“Dream Time,” “Asleep, You Are a River,” “Willow,” *Turtle Blessing*. Copyright © 1996. La Alameda Press.

“The Gravity of the Sacred,” *Buried in the Sky*. Copyright © 2002. La Alameda Press.

“Some Nights,” forthcoming in *U.S. 1 Worksheets*.

“In That Far Haven,” in *Portal*, work-in-progress.

“*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*,” Annie Dillard, New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974

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