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About the Dark Times: Poetry for the Miocene

Nadine Waggoner

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About the Dark Times

by Nadine Waggoner

Western Washington University
Honors Senior Capstone Project
June 2022

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for my past and future selves

thanks to Jane, Goldman, Ed
Gideon, Sabrina, Petra
my mom, dad, and siblings

LETTER FROM *THRINAXODON* TO *BROOMISTEGA*

Come with me into geological time,

away from today's weather, climate,
away from the arc of your life and the generations before you,
away from your iPhone and the countdown of your tamale warming up in the
microwave,

come with me into a hole underneath the ground, where you will be fossilized in an
embrace with a companion you either loved or hated, tolerated or never noticed, a
little hibernation never hurt, and let's be honest, thinking about it one hundred
thousand millennia down the line is easier

write sci-fi with me,

play a round or three of rummy,

toss a frisbee,

(safe from the concept of time, today)

—escape with me.

SECTION 1
Poetry for the Miocene

POEM THAT WON'T FIT ON MY WHITEBOARD

I want a poem I can write on my whiteboard, something to look at over and over.
Short. A container I can put my hope in, pin it down, find it again, and not lose it.

Nothing people say about me feels true anymore. Am I “the type to overwork myself”? Do I champion other writers’ works? Stuff I say about myself, that I like to take risks, that I’m not hungry.

They say not seeing yourself in a mirror is a sign that you might have been dead this entire time. I am outdated information. A fossil. A piece of vestigial armored plating, when fish had to defend themselves from invertebrates. Placoderm proof that cartilaginous fish used to have bones. Why did sharks go soft? I can’t focus, I can’t work. What extinction event led to this?

A character, a desire, danger. How to formulate an engaging plot. I am a drafted self destined to crumple in on myself. I used to curl up into a ball overfilled, overwhelmed by the desire within me, sheer force of wanting, arteries pulsing with ‘not enough.’ My goals have been rotting of unachievability in the back of the fridge.

“your generation deals with so much pressure we never had to deal with”

“mental challenges, not mental problems”

I want to lay down on the mud puddled earth
underneath the water spigot labeled “love”

it tastes like understanding
it tastes like redemption
it drips so slowly

I want to talk after class, but the professor clicks away. 20-year-old adult still craving parent figures

my mom thinks I'm depressed, I said part of me thought this is just what being an adult is like. This is what happens to kids who sat in a circle quiet and skipped, ducked under the question "what do you want to be as an adult"

for starters,
not an adult

anything but
an adult

MUCK

all this muck
is why I
need a poem

all this muck
is why I
can't write one

all this muck
is where the
poem will meet me,

sun-burnt,
mud-splattered,
bug-bit,
sweat-slicked,
sore, tussled,
dragged, dusted
heart-quickenened,
breathless, anxious,

— and lost

THEORIES REGARDING MARINE REPTILES

Paleontologists can tell the length of an ichthyosaur with just a fragment of preserved jawbone,

I can't figure out where I'm at with an apartment full of evidence.

My roommates' looks, incriminating. They must be talking about me behind my back. I think about telling them to say it to my face. No, that's ridiculous. There's nothing to say—

My leaky window and possibly mold-filled walls haunt me at night. I dream that I am consumed by disease. I visualize eating a bagel so that they don't go bad. I should put them in the freezer soon

"Poetry"? "Nonfiction poetry"? "Autobiographical poetry"? Creation where? Creativity when?

Creativity when I repeat the same phrases in my head over and over and over, then write them down with no embellishment

I hate reading embellishment

I hate reading anything without a Strong Willed Voice behind it

Black and white—

"Press the keys firmly"

—notes that echo

So focused on angling my fingers so that my nails didn't click against the grand piano, focused on going from measure to measure without stumbling,

until harsh words and harsh tones, fade into harsh voices in a empty mind

I need transportation away from here and I won't find it in Beethoven

but I once found it in Bach

a spiritual experience,
our church speakers blasting classical music
for an auditorium filled with one,
small
blond girl,

shaking—

—this is what they want me to feel on Sundays

Here it is.

This the jaw bone from which the rest of the body can be extrapolated,

years

down

the line

LEPIDOPTERA

I want a poem I can hold in two hands
A lyric like an echo like the multicolored scales of Lepidoptera,
a poem that bites, a moth with a jaw

Butterflies are moths who sought the daylight
who used a proboscis to take advantage of plants that reproduced sexually

Moths evolved ears before bats evolved sonar
There was so much to hear

There was so much to hear on this earth before dinosaurs became herons that
populate the wave-soaked boundaries between "safe" and "in-danger"

Each summer warmer than the last, record rainfall, record highs and lows,
record levels of googling Suicide Prevention articles for close friends at 2am,
broken refrain of *wanting not to exist* confronting a mounting fear of extinction,
but life is not as fragile as I once thought.

When humans go extinct, epoch after evolutionary epoch will go unchronicled
It will be so vibrant in those post-human ecosystems,

Insects will continue to experience the earth using senses we still haven't described
We have never been alone on this planet,

and we won't make it to Mars before our spaceships and our astronauts and our
billionaires succumb to our forest fires, before we are outcompeted by crows,
seagulls, racoons, and rats

I hope when my body wastes away I fought to stay alive despite the emptiness,
despite the rotting cocoon.

SECTION 2
Poetry for the Late Cretaceous

DEATH TOLL

Every other person I know is sick or tested positive for covid
and tests are hard to come by

“Rapid tests aren’t accurate, you have to get a PCR test”

“Omicron is in the throat not the nasal passages”

“There’s a company handing out rigged tests that always come back negative”

College guidance going from “stop the spread”

to “slow the spread”

to “ignore it, and go to class”

The virus traveling faster than gossip,
coughs traveling farther than dining hall silverware

Isolation dorms full, full dorms closed,

The hour bell on campus rings a death toll

I see the sickness hovering over groups of students
huddled close together, laughing, masks down,
the sickness like an aura on an elderly couple
on a morning walk who I swerve to avoid

I see covid reflected in knit brick water puddles

I hear the word “greed” resound in my ears

CUSTOM POEM

"I think your mental health concerns me more than covid at this point"

I want a poem that's my type,
 a poem that spells out my twelve-syllable Starbucks drink order—
 a poem that's a custom-ordered bouquet—
 a poem that's a funeral consultation and seating arrangement guide—
 a poem that reschedules grief—
 a poem that prints a return address for This Inconsolable Mourning

The nose wire of my handmade cloth mask breaks through the fabric,
 sharp edge of an aluminum strip, broken in two from being folded in half,
 fabric glue sticking to nothing

It became bent when dropped the mask in a parking lot and found it again
 completely flattened in a pavement puddle, but still usable
 sometimes I pick up masks on the ground to see if they match my style
 masks of all sizes strewn around campus, but none of them really fit my face
 none of them exactly express my aesthetic, my politics, my pronouns

My wet breath bounces back at me—my test will come back negative

I am not coughing, I am not sick—and yet

"It's only a matter of time with community spread so high"

In the 21st century it's the only thing community has to offer—
 a virus custom-made to infect *you*

and with every new subvariant
 with each new percentage of classes "now fully in-person!"

It really doesn't matter what my preference is.

POEM AGAIN

I want a poem by someone who overcomes hardships every single day and still believes in the goodness of the world and humanity

I want that person to be me

I want to read a poem and feel genuinely uplifted

"What is the purpose of poetry?" I find myself asking, for my self-taught self-directed course on multi-modal poetry

running so hard that you hear your heartbeat around you and mostly like drums in your ears

so that you fill the whole length of your trachea with cold morning air

Sometimes writing feels like that.

like flinging myself into the air on impulse,

but that's not what it is

It's a decision,

it's a decision to communicate through this thing called "poetry"

it's a decision to put on the "poetry" robes and play at being a "poet"

it's a performance "isn't everything?"

And embodying the role and practicing the skills of a poet

meeting other poets and talking about poetry

It can be something you are in life, you want in your life,

to focus on language and questions of beauty in everyday things,

to write in images,

It's not that complicated until you have depression
and you can't figure out why anyone does anything

You can't logic yourself out of bed

You can't logic yourself into being
an academic or
a poet or
a person in the kitchen eating breakfast

You are on the outside looking in

And maybe you drag yourself out of bed
and you decide to make waffles
and you measure the ingredients and put them in a bowl
and you wait for the waffle maker to warm up and the red light to turn on
and you realized that

you're a person making waffles and you imagine yourself
being a person sitting at the kitchen counter
writing poetry and making waffles at the same time

And maybe burning your waffles

And maybe writing shitty poetry while you
eat a sticky syrupy burnt peanut butter breakfast

And maybe living another year from the inside, from inside
your body and inside your mind, and maybe enjoying it,

And maybe writing a genuinely uplifting poem—someday

IF I WROTE POETRY

If I wrote poetry instead of scrolling, instead of sleeping

If I wrote poetry instead of walking to the ocean

If I wrote poetry instead of eating

If I wrote poetry instead of reading poetry

I wouldn't have poetry to write

If I stressed instead of giving,

if I didn't eat,

if I didn't eat,

if I didn't eat

It's death, you know?

It's slowly killing myself

I want to live!

I want to write poetry

I want to eat with my mother and eat with my friends, eat with my professors, eat with my roommates eat with strangers I want full meals with appetizers and sides I want napkins

You call it nourishment,

I need it

I'm looking for it like I lost my keys like it must be somewhere around here or maybe I left them in the car

It's nothing, it's living 22 years, it's the passage of time, it's a college education, it's a coming-of-age novel, it's boring, it's instant oatmeal, it's wet rocks and seaweed, it is miss-shelved in aisle 8.

It has potential but it falls flat, it's deficient, it's trying, it's really not a big deal, just "muscle through these next few weeks."

Lessen the load. Self care. Cases are going down. Double mask. Shooter on campus? Exposure notification. In what world is *this* the hardest quarter of the pandemic? Concert tickets. Engine stalling.

POLITICAL POEM

I want a poem that's not political, because politics doesn't exist, and all the atrocities being committed to other people groups aren't being committed by my people group, no one is complicit, and there is ethical consumption, and there are poems

I want a poem where the earth is healthy and thriving and nothing is going extinct, in fact, new species are discovered every day evolving from old species, transforming joyously to new chemical compounds new strings of DNA and new genders

I want a poem where I can love the people around me without doing the math of how they hurt me as a child and how I am trying to heal as an adult, I want a poem where my childhood friends' posts on instagram don't make me angry, and a poem where we all live together so closely that we catch up on news when we see each other in the course of everyday life and not through communication platforms designed to profit off of our loneliness and feed into our jealousy and mistrust

I want a poem with no genocides and massacres.

Sometimes I feel like I'm one of the plants in Princess Nausicaa's garden in the bottom of the castle corridors past empty suits of armor, I feel that if we were all fed water drawn up from the well, we wouldn't spew toxic chemicals anymore, and we would be so so beautiful

I am trying to draw up a poem from the bottom of the well, past layers and layers of geological time

I am drawing water from the Tethys Sea where cetaceans and sirenians learned to swim

I want to be a part of this planet's joyful invention. I want to be a part of its resilience

My generation inherits the global markets and networks and deep rooted greed
and the self-destruction you preach

But the gangly, furless, deer-fish that whales used to be learned new songs, that
perhaps are as old as time

I sing that song
written in my
inner ear
while I

lower
this
rope,

hand
over
hand.

SECTION 3
Poetry for the Permian

POEM THAT FITS ON MY WHITEBOARD

In the dark times,
will there also be singing?

Yes,
there will be singing,
about the dark times.

by Bertolt Brecht

“For [] poetry was a communicative spoken art. [] poems tend to be narrative rather than lyrical. ... [] wrote verse that is mostly political or at least has a social dimension, often reworking poetic themes and forms of the past.”

I'm afraid to put too much emphasis on it, for fear that it might slip away

—

“I don't understand why he thinks it's my fault”

I call you as often as I refill my mug from the fridge,
and text you as often as I gulp down the water
I set on my desk to drink while I work

I think hearts were invented for me to send to you and
kisses were invented for me to express how I feel
hearing you laugh or watching you yawn

I didn't understand how my mom could be
more worried about my mental health
than covid, but I do with you

You're isolating and I'm isolating and we're both isolated.

I felt an ant on my collarbone last week and I squished it, accidentally

“I have good news and I have bad news,” I told you,
“the good news is that the ants and fruit flies
in my room are disappearing. The bad news
is that I am lonelier than ever.”

I miss the ants, wandering across my desk, in between my keyboard keys, the fruit flies drowning themselves in my tea when I’m not looking, the fruit flies landing on the mirror forming an image of two fruit flies, feet to feet, the ants that don’t even pause when you put an obstacle in their path, and unwaveringly explore domestic corners that don’t have food for ants to eat or water for ants to drink.

My whiteboard isn’t empty any more, but the blank space is you, in between the letters, in between lines:

I miss you,

—and maybe I miss me too

INTRICATE

I want a poem that's dense

where you have to underline and connect the words with
highlighter and pen for the meaning to unravel

A poem that is unapologetically complex and sorrowful

I want an hour's work of dissecting an intricate poem

I want to sit down and learn how to kiss a new person for the first time,
how they breathe through their nose
and when they peek at me under their eyelids and when they don't,
and how long it takes for them to open again

I want immersion with another soul,
line by line

I want every word to feel like I know them too well already

I want to listen to Pony again for the first time
I want a cadence that establishes a pattern—and then breaks it

I want illustrations that go with the words

I want to sit in an uncomfortable chair and
listen to an elderly person talk to me

I want to sit

criss

cross

applesauce and disappear into a
collective of squirmy children
who will probably forget all of this tomorrow

I want to pull

long socks

to my knees

UNDERSTANDING

I want a poem where it was all a misunderstanding
 I want a poem where I was wrong
 I want a poem where the possibilities are revealed

I want a poem where I smudge my glasses clean with
 glasses cleaner and a microfiber cloth
 I've just taken a shower
 my bleach-damaged hair is curling down my ears like vines
 memories I've sunken deep are resurfacing like a sandbar

Watch the sea lions pull themselves out of the water to sun bathe,
 watch the pelicans land

"Rush headlong into an irrational death"
 "That is the only way to wake up from the dream"

I know what you mean: live for something

My irrational death involves binging Moth Light Media on YouTube

I like the way he never raises his voice in pitch, the way he cites Research Gate in the description, and the earnest way he apologizes to commenters who never capitalize their words, who complain about inaccuracies in one of the most inaccurate and extensive fields there is

I don't know who he is or where he's from, but I know we agree on something: our story is so much bigger and wider than it seems, that non-human forms of life are beautiful, that there's something within the act of scientific inquiry that offers intrinsic rewards, that we aren't alone

I walk past worms drying on the sidewalk

I want more days
I want more tries

I'm getting used to failing now, and I want you by my side this next time

I want you to teach me what it is,
what it really is.

MAMMALIAN

Am I awake enough for this?

Where does joy come from?

Why do other human beings make
the decisions that they make?

Why cats?

Why do cats lick face ?

Cat is napping

There is a consciousness of my mind

in the actions that I take, at this point, thinking is habitual

What would it mean to break the habit? What
would it mean to be cold-blooded?

Cold-blooded animals aren't cold, no

they're warm, they're exothermic

imagine the sunlight stored in rocks speeding up your
heart, your thoughts, your ability to satiate your appetite

Maybe I don't have to think so hard. It's not so direct

but the sun still drinks with us,

sips honeyed ice tea with us

on summer days

What is an ecological community? When your food web is a cobweb—

My ecosystem depends on / steak and potatoes / sunlight and nutrients

Define *paleoecology*, define *trophic cascade*

the whole world as friends,

the whole world and
even the dead world

Most cultures believe in an underworld,
paleontologists, archeologists,
they find the dead sandwiched
between the layers of the earth
beneath our feet—
they dig it up. They unearth it.

The cat twitches in its sleep,
experiencing imagined reality,
the cat is dreaming

The mammals are thinking,
they are regulating their body temperature with the energy from food

What does it mean to be an apex predator? I think it's true that
putting a gun in a man's hand doesn't make him one.

An empty plate,
a pair of front-facing eyes, claws, teeth, venom...
these are the accessories

A prey animal, a herd. A burrow. A high perch, a nest

What does it mean to find a skeleton of a long extinct fish
with a baby of its own species in its stomach?

What does it mean to live on this earth?

Where are the instructions?

Where is the salvation?

See the impact site,
see the crater circle grown over with curling vines,
see the roots of trees anchored in sediment

This is what it means, death
This is what death means: life

In between: love
and hurt
and hurt.

THE WORLD WHERE POETRY EXISTS

That's my world

The room where music plays

The house where the fridge is full

The city where my memories are nestled in corners

The paths where Greeks once walked

The empire once run by satraps

The roads where once garden waystations were tended
 for travelers and royal messengers on horses

The planet where continents drifted together and traded animals back and forth

The forest where giant sloths once harvested avocados

My world:

The world where my mom decided to have four children

The world where my grandma and grandpa adopted two girls in the Philippines

The world where my czech ancestors crossed into America through Canada

The world where a red-headed boy in New York
 dreams of writing stories and making films

The world where everyone wants to eat my sardines

The world with lyrics and lyrics and lyrics and lyrics

I'm sorry, I'm a poet

I'm sorry, I tried to be kind

I'm sorry, I tried to read what you assigned, write what you assigned me to write

I'm sorry, I carry myself tall even as I slouch even as I starve

I'm sorry, I don't give a fuck that you don't give a fuck about me

I'm sorry things turned out the way they did

And I'm exactly where I need to be

I'm not there yet,

 it's not spring - yet

(But spring will come when you need it)
and your world, it will return
to how-it-once-was

HOW DO I EXPLAIN ABOUT RIVERS

How do I explain about rivers?

This poem is about rivers to the sea &
salmon to swim up them

It's about the streams of water
the rain leaves in parking lots

Rivers are / poetry is, abundance

If arboreal habitats are our birthright as primates,
rivers are our chosen family

Rivers beckon me to travel downstream,
with the current, in a deep channel

Rivers are / I am a compass to the sea,
a tendency to flood in conditions of heavy rainfall

I want to be 16 again, at a childhood friend's grandparents' farm, at the rope swing
on the muddy bank, jumping into the river with all my clothes on

Wondering what a "crawfish" is
finding frogs and bird nests in the grass

Dappled sunlight and horses above us on the hill
dogs and children,
freedom and sunlight,
maybe learning to drive was worth it

Someone read me "Heidi" before I was old enough to string scenes together in my
head to form into a wider plot, it was only snapshots
of mountains, of a grandfather, goat milk, an attic.

My first books were isolated and static images,
and the first images in my memory are so faint
Fuzzy pictures in my mind,
fuzzy faces from before they realized I needed glasses
to see / anything at / a distance / from me

The theoretical, the hypothetical landscapes of my childhood, that's what I see
outside the city, outside Seattle, a few hours out, in the country

Scenes from books, the taste of grass,
 wet spots on the knees of my jeans
 and four-leafed clover. Bleeding
 heart flowers, ferns, and nettles,
 the type of muddy hill spongy with fallen pine needles

I want the world to be a poem I don't have to write
It's all there, how can I explain it?
Under the banks of small rivers. Go, look for it

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Don't worry,

The versions of yourself you project
for different situations are "you" too

It's not just multi-faceted, it's fractal:

- the one high on caffeine, clambering onto a table to monologue about the evils of christianity to people you met two weeks ago
- and the one overthinking the interaction an hour later,
- and the one thinking over the interaction 4 years later,
- and the one analyzing new facets of everything about that situation, everything about you, 20, 50 years down the line

Don't worry:

I don't hate you anymore.

You provide me endless
subjects of study, that means:
that I love you

What is research if not an expression of love?

Let me do research for you.

Let me find every poem on pinterest and put them
in a ten thousand-full pinterest folder that only you can access

Let me tell you about crocodilians, who decided, (after the dinosaurs suffered a trophic cascade caused by low light levels from light pollution from ash caused by the impact of an asteroid) decided to evolve long lanky limbs to run on land, their lizard-like crocodile bodies now fully-terrestrial, and maybe those terrestrial crocs had good, successful lives hunting early mammals,

but it wasn't what they were designed to do, and the Nile crocodile doing death-rolls on unsuccessful juvenile antelope is arguably: more fulfilled

Maybe I feel like a land-locked lanky crocodile sometimes (a lot of times)
 milliseconds of geological time away from being outcompeted
 in an absurd and chaotic world aching with loss
 "after the extinction of the non-avian dinosaurs"
 haunted by what-could-have-been

Don't worry: my thesis has led to a body and a conclusion

It's ok to be the-way-that-you-are,
 you belong, and are succeeding at what-really-matters

Sink your teeth into your prey,
 lodge them deep:

 they'll be found down the line,
 and someone will find them

 will understand / who you are