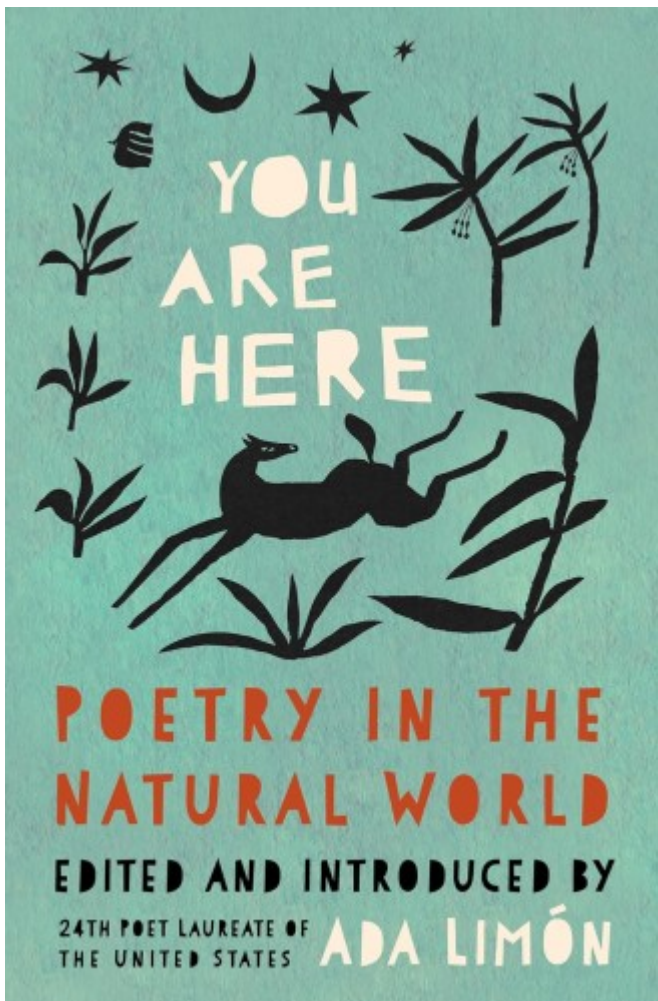


Poems that help us breathe together

A new anthology edited by US poet laureate Ada Limón invites us into the natural world.

by [Jeffrey L. Johnson](#) in the [April 2025](#) issue
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In Review



You Are Here

Poetry in the Natural World

Edited by Ada Limón

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

In her charming introduction to this anthology, US poet laureate Ada Limón suggests that poems and trees “let us breathe together.” This comment calls to mind priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “God’s Grandeur,” which notes a rejuvenating spirit infusing the world—“nature is never spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”—as well as Jesuit theologian and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s phrase “the breathing together of all things.” The anthology subtitle’s preposition “in” signals Limón’s intention to help readers get outdoors, where they might breathe with other creatures of earth.

Limón and the poets she gathers in these pages show that when people claim their places outdoors, they breathe with trees, birds, and other outdoor inhabitants. As trees in a forest stand in proximity, their branches reaching out into communities of peers, the poems of Limón’s anthology relate to one another in their attentiveness within nature.

The whisper of wind through leaves of a backyard tree might draw a listener’s attention, eliciting memories of that tree’s planting and of its neighborhood history, or inviting the listener to research the tree’s botanical ancestry. In *You Are Here*, poet Cecily Parks feels anticipatory grief for a beloved hackberry tree about to be cut down. She muses on the homely reputation of the hackberry as a species, and she remembers how, for years, that particular doomed hackberry spread its branches to make a shelter for her.

Hiking to see redwoods, Dorianne Laux expects to feel small under the giant trees. Instead she feels lifted by them:

I felt large
inside my life, the sum of Jung’s
archetypes: the self, the shadow,
the anima, the persona of my
personhood fully recognized
and finally accepted, . . .

Ellen Bass describes pushing a stroller through a park called Lighthouse Field as the maple trees above her become houses of light, the evening sun resting on their branches, crowning them in gold. Alberto Ríos steps into his backyard for a choral revelry with sparrows, spiders, geckos, and caterpillars.

In the Yahwist's creation story in Genesis 2, after breathing life into the man, God plants a garden of other breathing things. Then God gives the man creative license to breathe out names for all the plants and animals he sees. José Olivarez imagines feeling shamed by trees for his inability to remember their names. He cannot tell a maple from an oak. Similarly, Molly McCully Brown watches herds of mule deer and feels alone and "herdless" in a new place, without words to identify even the common, spreading vegetation around her. Even so, she declares that "what // comes first is wonder / . . . at having woken // someplace new."

Feeling out of place in a corner of the Sonoran Desert, under a eucalyptus tree native to Australia, Rigoberto González's Mexican grandmother, speaking in her native dialect, encourages that tree and the tulips at her feet to grow. In a universal language of life, rain falls on all three migrants together—the woman, the tree, and the flowers. Analicia Sotelo recalls her grandfather's shadows in a natural landscape of dry grass and mesquites that frame loss for her. She imagines the old man scoffing at her imaginative description of herself as an outsider and nowhere a native. In another desert immigrant poem, this one hilarious, Eduardo C. Corral speaks in familiar tones to a saguaro, reminding the treelike cactus of its Mexican relatives. Then he pays tribute to two other migrants dear to him: his mother and the sonnet.

Carl Phillips lets weeds stand for a poet's first jottings. They "mean nothing." Then bees swarm through those ordinary blades of grass with ministrations that pollinate and promise new growth, perhaps implying the inspiration of the imagination that turns random thoughts into a finished poem.

You Are Here demonstrates that poems are packages of language waiting on a page to be read or recited, the breath of readers matching the breath of the poet. The poem might be constructed formally, according to convention and tradition, or shaped more obliquely, cracked and bent syntactically and linearly to release locked-in literary energy. In private reading or in social recitation, the poem might breathe out its sound and sense. Limón's anthology plants a strong stand of poems that help us breathe together with one another and all of creation.