

# Gaia 2020



A poem by Steve Walter

Second Edition: Gaia 2020

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*Front cover image:*

Apollo 8: Earthrise. NASA. Taken by astronaut Bill Anders on Christmas Eve 1968.

# **Gaia 2020**

**A poem by Steve Walter**

## Foreword

This poem began life posing a simple question to my parents (deceased). It is rooted in the reply I received; a celebration of Earth, as the origin of life. Mum particularly, was a keen supporter of Friends of the Earth, (hence the suggested donation).

Through detailed geology, we have identified all the tissues of the Earth. But, like dissecting a body, this alone brings us no closer to the living person, or the spirit within. Here, I have tried to find a language to describe the physicality of Earth and, not least, to imagine something of her persona, throughout time.

\*

2020, once seemed a long time away from the first view of Earthrise, and early emissions targets. 2030, the target for the UN Sustainable Development Goals. 2040, to mark the banning of petrol and diesel cars. 2050, critical Climate Change, CO2 emissions targets. Will we do enough in time?

\*

*There are many subtle energies, which influence our lives and our becoming, and may be inspiration for the sensitive...*

## Gaia 2020

*I have an emotional attachment to Earth, that goes far beyond  
my ability to understand or explain.<sup>1</sup>*

They walk into the middle distance,  
lit in silhouette, sunset, focused,  
as if they've found an answer –  
even from here I can feel them smile...

Nothing is left of home. My tears  
run dry – I can utter barely

a word, syllables clutter at the back of my throat  
I cannot spit them out  
afraid I may choke, or swallow  
what once meant something.

I speak in silence: *Mum, Dad,*  
*what do you say to me now?*

*Remember where you came from...*



The largest of the four *terrestrial* planets,  
alongside Mercury, Venus, Mars,  
and the most dense in the solar system.

Four and a half billion years old, spinning  
on a tilt, creating seasons with the sun,  
attracted to the moon; gravity causing  
ocean tides, a gradual slowing, alien – wild as night!

Formed by accretion; a gathering of dust  
of stars - solar rock clustering.

A heart of solid iron, surrounded by liquid iron,  
generates the magnetic field – leads birds migrating –  
dense mantle drives rigid tectonic plates –  
moving over each other, moving under each other

shifting like the bones of a growing skull,  
or the slow breathing of a sleeping dragon.

Take time, Earth time, time lapse  
millions of years into an hour,  
watch its supple, liquid movements,  
different tissues, stretching.

Slow down the conversation of birds,  
speed up the vibrations of Earth -- listen  
to her voice! The resonance of stone.

Watch the 'super-continent' *Rodinia*<sup>ii</sup>  
break apart, 600 million years ago,  
and move the older rocks of England and Wales,  
to join Scotland, a closer relation to Nova Scotia<sup>iii</sup>.



In the presence of stone – Earth made of stone,  
compared to which we're no more than mush.

Six thousand million, million, million tonnes –  
oblate spheroid – diameter averaging 8000 miles.

5,500 degrees at its centre, close  
to the surface temperature of the sun.

Three quarters covered in water – thin oceanic crust –  
the continental crust, less dense, silicate: feldspar, quartz.

*And the guttering red rock, sliced  
like decks of cards slanted into the sea*<sup>iv</sup>.

Little fingers playing castles in the sand,  
castles of stone...

Stone Age, Iron, Bronze,  
Neolithic, aboriginal, native.

Portal dolmen, cairn – stone listening –  
Ogham, birthstone, cove, rock, pebble, sand.

You breathe through the biosphere  
holding the keys to time – mother.

Only 1% of all species that ever lived are alive today –  
after several mass extinction events  
and likely to be more – the Earth at mid-life crisis.

What cataclysmic shrug when Theia, the size of Mars,  
hit Earth a glancing blow,  
and loosed pieces coalesced, into moon.

That same volcanic rock 'discovered' by Apollo 11.  
The bag which contained the first samples,  
still with traces of moon dust, sells for \$1.8million.



Think of volcano: *basalt, gabbro, granite,  
pumice, obsidian, tuff.*

Or formed under heat, under pressure:  
*amphibolite, serpentine, slate,*  
as limestone transmutes to marble.

Otherwise laid down in sea sediments over millennia:  
*limestone, sandstone, shale, lignite, gypsum, coal.*

Igneous, metamorphic, sedimentary.  
Stone listening to the moment, mineral – alive!

*Seventy-million years ago the geologists reckoned  
this stone was laid down on the sea's bed...<sup>v</sup>*



Dissolved salt from weathered rock  
fills our capillaries, bathes every cell.

Haemoglobin - binding, attending to oxygen  
in our blood. Haematite - a crystal  
to help balance our emotions –  
rock, rain, river – sea, blood, stone.

Xylem, phloem – rock, neuron – rock, artery, vein – rock  
vibrant crystal, rock, timeless, ageless, weathered rock  
water over stone<sup>vi</sup>, stream, rock  
fossil, petrified wood, lignin, strata, bedrock.

The magnetic fabric of rock, preserved,  
locked-in, a geographical record  
over a geological scale<sup>vii</sup>.

Conversation between the rock of mountains,  
living echoes: stone, cliff, valley.

Geometric shapes, like shapes in certain crystals –  
quantum design – rock retaining sound, an echo history,  
the way walls hold voices, surfaces unique like fingerprints.

Yet we live our lives mostly ignorant  
of the enormity of what is within and beyond  
the 'underlying positive geometry'<sup>viii</sup>



Properties of stone: silica,  
as crystalline opal,  
transforms to quartz, flint - formed around  
the cavities of burrowing shells –  
which when struck, breaks consistently  
with a conchoidal fracture – a fracture  
that produces curved surfaces  
used in knife blades, skin scrapers, arrowheads  
from the Stone Age to the present day,  
lending an edge to surgical tools.

Rock holds memory: crystal memory  
stores quantum information in light' ix

Quartz in all the colours – take  
purple crystalline quartz –  
amethyst, cut into gemstone...

Quartz, resistant to weather,  
remains the rock of mountain tops.

Quartz sands, selected  
for lenses  
for the largest telescopes.

How quartz crystals can vibrate at precise  
frequencies, keep good time,  
integral to the physio's ultrasound machine.

Quartz melts hotter than most metals,  
is used in moulds as foundry sand  
to smelt iron, or copper, tin, meld into bronze.

Quartz injected under pressure with chemicals  
into the ground, creating tremor – fracking!

*We live in a beautiful world* x



The height above the surface where water boils at body heat.

*Summer breeze, blowing through the jasmine in my mind* xi

The radiance of Earth's chakras – aurora –  
particles charged from the sun  
accelerate along lines of magnetic fields,  
strike atoms in the upper atmosphere,  
cause electrons to shift to higher  
energy states. When they slip  
back, drop an orbit or two, emit  
photons – light at different frequencies,  
different energies – cosmic rainbows.

In this latest snapshot of a century –  
silica in microchips,  
printed in circuit boards,  
touch-sensitive screens, the face  
of artificial intelligence –  
Earth finds a mirror...



'Hot ice' could have seeded life on Earth.  
Unlike normal ice, Ice VII  
only forms under intense pressure  
and is dense enough to sink in water.

Find it, outside the lab, in the deepest  
layers of Neptune, Uranus,  
or perhaps on icy moons  
like Europa and Ganymede.

Imagine salts, a comet slamming  
into an icy body could create  
something like the prebiotic soup  
that led to life on Earth.<sup>xii</sup>

Much of the matter which forms us  
comes from other galaxies,  
carried on an intergalactic wind<sup>xiii</sup>



*Young then, we accepted trees on the ridge  
as friends, climbing their branches  
as into the arms of parents. Autumn.*<sup>xiv</sup>

I used to live in Chelsfield...  
*Chel* meaning chalk – chalk fields,  
farmers turning earth, chalk, flint,  
the roots of language reaching through time  
like genes to their origin.



Earth's gifts; there's enough to go around,  
but only if we are not constantly at war,  
mowing people down with guns, engines and wheels,  
or, as countries, threatening annihilation.

*And what is life? An hour glass on the run  
a mist retreating from the morning sun...?*<sup>xv</sup>



I bought a geological map of the world today,  
imagine Earth seen through a prism,  
painted with colours from outer space.

*I don't know who to trust anymore*<sup>xvi</sup>.



*He has assembled her spine, he cleaned each piece carefully  
and sets them in perfect order...*<sup>xvii</sup>

How I've loved you, how I cry for you,  
as we continue to pollute land, sea, air – carbon dioxide rises –  
carrion crow from a skeleton tree,  
cloud suspended, beneath a universal sky.

Under a canopy of stars, you saw me unfold  
from a scattering of bones, to the muscled heat of a bear<sup>xviii</sup>.

Walden: feel the pulse, quantum rock,  
earth, body, blood, now think  
of volcano, tsunami, landslide, storm.



Bare feet, walking on grass, through summer dew,  
deer running free through forest, roebuck in the road.

Leaves grow out of his granite mouth –  
the Green Man, Green Spirit, looks on, furious!  
There is no true ritual of respect,

no real, united sense of urgency,  
insufficient desire to turn around  
what otherwise seems to be our destiny.

We need to reconnect with all that Earth is –  
rediscover the moment, uncover the profound.

Inspire the sculptor to reveal  
and polish, the hidden, silk skins of stone.



*Today I am a small blue thing, like a marble or an eye*<sup>xix</sup>

The beauty spoken of by astronauts,  
those first colour pictures –  
horizons: earth rising like the moon, 1968.

Look at you suspended in the night  
perfectly blue, perfectly round, dancing among stars.

We can watch you now, with our webcam  
from outer space  
every blink of your eye, from day to night.

I cry for all that is lost, for all we have done,  
for all we have not done, for all who are to tread upon  
and stumble on what remains.

*We are spirits in the material world<sup>xx</sup>*



Curlews heard through an open cottage window,  
across fields, summer dawn, breaking sky.  
One tree hill.

The long garden behind the cottage,  
remembering forty-forty  
playing hide and seek with cousins, boy to girl –  
*coming if you're ready or not!*

Easter sunshine on granite Lakeland hills  
Eskdale, Ennerdale, Shap –  
my uncle swimming naked in a rocky, golden stream,  
the water's colour leached from grassy fields,  
ringed with necklaces of stone.



*The earth does not belong to man;  
man belongs to the earth. This we know.  
All things are connected...<sup>xxi</sup>*

You gave us oil, we gave you plastic,  
we darkened the skies  
with the remnants of combustion...

*Dead men naked they shall be one  
with the man in the wind and the west moon<sup>xxii</sup>*

All that we have made we have taken from you  
forgive us  
all that we have mined, drilled, exploded, plundered  
we have taken from you  
forgive us  
you give us water, water which we squander  
forgive us  
you have embraced the sun's warmth  
fed us, clothed us  
yet we burn the fuel laid down within your skin,  
pollute the air, waste all that you give us  
forgive us

we have grown from you, we live with you, without you we die  
you have breathed life into animal into plant

you have traced the moon on my chest,  
when I die, what will I have done for you?

*Far above the world  
planet Earth is blue  
and there's nothing I can do<sup>xxiii</sup>*



The church bell chimes twelve.

Listen as we revolve, to the spirit of our ancestors,  
dowse subtle energies, Earth energies,  
reach below surface to a darker ecology,  
to what it means truly to sustain...  
shaman, tiger, eagle, bear, naiad, dryad, water, tree.

Let me lean my head upon your shoulder, father.  
Silurian, Devonian, Jurassic...  
Eon, era, epoch, age... Anthropocene.

*Please do not throw this away – there is no away!<sup>xxiv</sup>*



Just to be in silence,  
in the woods at dusk, embraced  
by the scent of damp grass –  
the last sun sinking –  
earth firm beneath body,  
to celebrate the turning  
of the day, the cycle  
of the moon, only broken  
by the faint sound of animals shifting  
as fallen twigs snap under cloven hooves,  
and the world spins ribbons of new tomorrows...

So many millions of species still unknown.



Some predict an ice age to begin in 2030<sup>xxv</sup>  
when sun flares drop and we reach  
a *Maunder* minimum (frost parties on the Thames).

Impermanence on a considerably  
permanent planet.

As a teenager, I read and re-read  
books on animals: lions, cheetahs<sup>xxvi</sup>,  
gorillas, chimps, wild dogs<sup>xxvii</sup> dolphins<sup>xxviii</sup>, whales.

*The blue whale's penis is nine feet long,  
which may require additional self-control*<sup>xxix</sup>.

At the ocean's edge, the sea sifts  
through hieroglyphs of broken rock.

Sense the easy flight of Johnathan Livingston Seagull  
seek a universal answer, something other than 42,  
but including the words: *David Attenborough*.

What are we and our children, going to do?  
Cut back on carbon, save habitats,  
think differently, sustain, unite in our concern?

If I could but live, to see the year  
petrol and diesel cars are banned!



*And in the end...*<sup>xxx</sup>

We will all leave this third rock  
from the sun – the ending of our lives  
like locking the door on an empty house  
for the last time, hollow with carpets  
which comfort no one, curtains which remain open.

No footfall, only daylight gradually driven out  
from the corners of the rooms,  
as sun escapes with the blue, to leave  
a couple standing, looking out of the window,  
their arms around each other.

Because I will miss you,  
will miss this – our home.



## Endnotes

- i Portraits of Earth, Freeman Patterson
- ii Once known as Pangaea
- iii Bedrock Geology, British Geological Survey, 5th Edition
- iv Marloes, *Skomer*
- v Marie Barrett, *Continuity*
- vi Water over Stone, Frances Horowitz
- vii Bedrock Geology, British Geological Survey, 5th Edition. *The Palaeomagnetic fabric of a rock helps to determine the place on Earth where it was created. The ambient magnetic field at the time of its formation can be locked into a rock and retained as a geographical record over a geological time span*
- viii New Scientist 29th July 2017
- ix *Scientific American*, John Matson, June 29 2010
- x Coldplay, Don't Panic
- xi Summer Breeze, Seals & Crofts
- xii *New Scientist* 22.7.17
- xiii *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*, July 2017
- xiv Ted Walter, Ledmores, Glos
- xv John Clare, What is Life?
- xvi Neil Young, A Man Needs a Maid, Harvest
- xvii Ted Hughes, Bride & Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days
- xviii *When the Change Came*
- xix Small Blue Thing, Suzanne Vega, Suzanne Vega
- xx Spirits in the Material World, Ghost in the Machine, (Arthur Koestler), The Police
- xxi Chief Seattle
- xxii Dylan Thomas, Death Shall Have no Dominion
- xxiii Space Oddity, David Bowie
- xxiv Sustainability policy, Interface Inc
- xxv Royal Astronomical Society, The National Astronomy Meeting 2015
- xxvi Elsa, Pippa, Joy Adams
- xxvii Jane Van Lewick Goodall
- xxviii Dr John C Lilly
- xxix Heathcote Williams, Whale Nation
- xxx The End, Beatles, Paul McCartney



Steve Walter has written poetry from an early age, inspired by his late father (Ted), who was once known as The Policeman Poet (featured on TV News – Nationwide).

Steve took his own show to the Edinburgh and Brighton Festival Fringes based on his autobiographical work, *Fast Train Approaching...*, which is a powerful, yet good humoured account of life during and after breakdown and recovery. He's intrigued by what makes us human, and the process of creative transformation.

Steve has a daughter and a son and lives in Tunbridge Wells with his second wife Liz, a physiotherapist.

*Other books include:*

**When the Change Came**, poems published by Indigo Dreams, 2016

**Voices**, *mental health survivors, carers, therapist, family and friends*, different experiences of mental health, (with commentary from psychotherapist Jenny Bloomer) published by [chipmunkpublishing.com](http://chipmunkpublishing.com), 2012

**Fast Train Approaching...** an autobiographical account of breakdown and recovery, published by [chipmunkpublishing.com](http://chipmunkpublishing.com), 2007

*This long poem is both elegy and tribute, honouring the poet's parents and the earth they cared for, and invoking many voices from science, art and popular culture.*

*Sounding notes of warning and love, Gaia 2020 is a moving addition to the rich and expanding literature of ecological concern.*

**Carol Rumens, Professor of English Literature,  
Bangor University**

“An incredibly thought-provoking poem. As a mental health charity, we are aware of the significance that nature plays in helping people feel better and re-take control of their lives after a mental health crisis. We are as much a part of nature, as nature is a part of us”.

**Tunbridge Wells Mayor's Charity 2018-2019,  
Mental Health Resource**



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