

Before You Read

THE ROUND WALLS OF HOME

Make the Connection

A View from Space

With our feet planted firmly here on earth, it's hard to hold on to the thought that our complicated lives take place on a planet spinning in space. But it's all a matter of perspective. Picture yourself cruising in outer space. What might you think and feel as you looked back at your home on earth?

Quickwrite

List some global problems or issues that affect everyone on earth. When you finish making your list, check the items you think most endanger earth's living things.



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Elements of Literature

Exposition:

Informative Writing

Exposition, writing that explains or gives information, is a main ingredient in most kinds of nonfiction. Essayists often combine exposition with description and narration.

Exposition is the kind of factual writing that explains a subject, gives information, or clarifies an idea.

For more on Exposition, see the Handbook of Literary Terms.

Reading Skills and Strategies



The Writer's Purpose: What Is the Aim?

To find out if a writer's purpose is **expository** (to give information) or **persuasive** (to persuade), ask these questions:

- Does the writer convey factual information or express opinions?
- Are the facts accurate? Is the information biased (slanted) to support the writer's views?
- Does the writer know what he or she is talking about? That is, how qualified is the writer?
- Is the writer trying to persuade me to do or believe something?

THE ROUND WALLS OF HOME

from A Natural History of the Senses

Diane Ackerman

Picture this: everyone you've ever known everyone you've ever loved, your whole experience of life, floating in one place, on a single planet underneath you. On that dazzling oasis, swirling with blues and whites, the weather systems form and travel. You watch the clouds tingle and swell above the Amazon and know the weather that develops there will affect the crop yield half a planet away in Russia and

WORDS TO OWN

oasis (ō-ā'sis) *n.*: fertile place. Oasis may also mean "place or thing offering welcome relief."

Home is springtime.

China. Volcanic eruptions make tiny spangles below. The rain forests are disappearing in Australia, Hawaii, and South America. You see dust bowls developing in Africa and the Near East. Remote sensing devices, judging the humidity in the desert, have already warned you there will be plagues of locusts¹ this year. To your amazement, you identify the lights of Denver and Cairo. And though you were taught about them one by one, as separate parts of a jigsaw puzzle, now you can see that the oceans, the atmosphere, and the land are not separate at all, but part of an intricate recombining web of nature. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, you want to click your magic shoes together and say three times: "There's no place like home."

You know what home is. For many years, you've tried to be a modest and eager watcher of the skies and of the Earth, whose green anthem you love. Home is a pigeon strutting like a petitioner in the courtyard in front of your house. Home is the law-abiding hickories out back. Home is the sign on a gas station just outside Pittsburgh that reads "If we can't fix it, it ain't broke." Home is springtime on campuses all across America, where students sprawl on the grass like the war-wounded at Gettysburg.² Home is the Guatemalan jungle, at times deadly

1. **plagues of locusts:** swarms of large grasshoppers that eat all plants in their path.

2. **Gettysburg:** town in Pennsylvania where a bloody Civil War battle was fought in 1863. Some 48,000 men were killed or wounded in the battle.

as an arsenal. Home is the pheasant barking hoarse threats at the neighbor's dog. Home is the exquisite torment of love and all the lesser mayhems of the heart. But what you long for is to stand back and see it whole. You want to live out that age-old yearning, portrayed in myths and legends of every culture, to step above the Earth and see the whole world fidgeting and blooming below you.

I remember my first flying lesson, in the doldrums of summer in upstate New York. Pushing the throttle forward, I zoomed down the runway until the undercarriage began to dance; then the ground fell away below and I was airborne, climbing up an invisible flight of stairs. To my amazement, the horizon came with me (how could it not, on a round planet?). For the first time in my life I understood what a valley was, as I floated above one at 7,000 feet. I could see plainly the devastation of the gypsy moth, whose hunger had leeched³ the forests to a mottled gray. Later on, when I flew over Ohio, I was saddened to discover the stagnant ocher⁴ of the air, and to see that the long expanse of the Ohio River, dark and chunky, was the wrong texture for water, even flammable at times, thanks to the fumings of plastics factories, which I could also see, standing like pustules⁵ along the river. I began to understand how people settle a landscape, in waves and at crossroads, how they survey a land and irrigate it. Most of all, I discovered that there are things one can learn about the world only from certain perspectives. How can you understand the ocean without becoming part of its intricate fathoms? How can you understand the planet without walking upon it, sampling its marvels

3. **leeched:** drained. Leeches are worms that suck blood.

4. **stagnant ocher** (stag'neat o'kor): foul dark yellow.

5. **pustules** (pus'tyoolz'): pimples or blisters.

WORDS TO OWN

intricate (in'tri-kt) *adj.*: elaborately detailed.

anthem (an'them) *n.*: song of praise. The writer

imagines earth's vivid greenness as a song of praise.

petitioner (pe-tish'an-ar) *n.*: person seeking favors.

one by one, and then floating high above it, to see it all in a single eye-gulp?

Most of all, the twentieth century will be remembered as the time when we first began to understand what our address was. The "big, beautiful blue, wet ball" of recent years is one way to say it. But a more profound way will speak of the orders of magnitude of that bigness, the shades of that blueness, the arbitrary delicacy of beauty itself, the ways in which water has made life possible, and the fragile euphoria of the complex ecosystem⁶ that is Earth, an Earth on which, from space, there are no visible fences, or military zones, or national borders. We need to send into space a flurry of artists and naturalists, photographers and painters, who will turn the mirror upon ourselves and show us Earth as a single planet, a single organism that's buoyant, fragile, blooming, buzzing, full of

6. ecosystem (ek'ō·sis'təm): community of animals and plants and their physical and chemical environment.

spectacles, full of fascinating human beings something to cherish. Learning our full address may not end all wars, but it will enrich our sense of wonder and pride. It will remind us that the human context is not tight as a noose, but large as the universe we have the privilege to inhabit. It will change our sense of what a neighborhood is. It will persuade us that we are citizens of something larger and more profound than mere countries, that we are citizens of Earth, her joy riders and her caretakers, who would do well to work on her problems together. The view from space is offering us the first chance we evolutionary toddlers have had to cross the cosmic street and stand facing our own home, amazed to see it clearly for the first time.

WORDS TO OWN

euphoria (yūō·fōr'ē·ə) n.: feeling of well-being.

MEET THE WRITER

"A Great Fan of the Universe"

To gather material for her writing, **Diane Ackerman** (1948–) has stood in the midst of millions of bats, straddled alligators, and swum right up to a whale's mouth. Sometimes, she admits, she's been truly frightened.

“ I try to give myself passionately, totally, to whatever I'm observing, with as much affectionate curiosity as I can muster, as a means of understanding a little better what being human is, and what it was like to have once been alive on the planet. . . . I appear to have a lot of science in my work, I suppose, but I think of myself as a Nature poet, if what we mean by nature is . . . the full sum of creation. ”

Ackerman grew up in a small Chicago suburb and walked to school through its deep, dark



woods instead of staying on the sidewalks, as she was supposed to do. She remembers creating her first metaphor in those forests: Bats hanging from the trees, she told her horrified friends, were "living plums."

Ackerman, an award-winning poet, published four books of poetry before she began writing

nonfiction. She has taught at Cornell, Columbia, and New York University and is now a contributor to *The New Yorker*. "The Round Walls of Home," from *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990), reveals her concerns about nature:

“ I'm a great fan of the Universe, which I take literally: as one. All of it interests me, and it interests me in detail. ”

The book inspired a PBS television series, which aired in 1995.