Dear Mother Earth

Denise Pendleton
Dear Mother Earth

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How often I think of you, each and every day I ask
what my actions have done and could do
to harm you, how to choose, what to use
for the food we want to grow, to keep, to cook,

what to throw away and how and where to put
each kind and weight of paper, cardboard, plastic.
What car will we buy now or next, what trips
will we take this summer, next year
how can we take care of you and ourselves too.

I worry about you when I open
my top kitchen drawer to pull out a plastic bag
its box designed to make its use trouble-free
for preserving the snacks, the sandwiches,
for my children’s lunch and our summer
sails on your blue waters. It’s for you that I wash
the used ones, that I nag my husband and children
to do the same. Just hang them here to dry I say,
we can reuse them again many times before we
put them into our closet bag then stuff

that bag of bags into the grocery store recycle bin
from which I walk away with faith that this final
act wipes away all our sins but worried
wondering if anyone really does right by you
with this overflow of tired plastic bags placed here
so that the virtuous, the dutiful among us can be
delivered from the guilt of our transgressions.

Bless me Mother Earth for I have purchased
Thai iced tea not knowing that this yellow straw would remain
a stain somewhere in your innards for over two hundred years.
I didn’t know the plastic bottles

*(every second of every day

in the United States, a thousand thrown away)*

that I faithfully put into the blue plastic recycle bin
would be shipped across your vast oceans all the way
to India to make a mountain not of your soil, stone,
trees, but of plastic we actually paid money for to slake
our thirst now down-cycled they say
to never
truly disappear

Forgive me for giving into the convenience
of this aluminum foil that I unroll
(two hundred and twenty containers
used every second—with its bauxite mined from your
red dirt and clay on one of your continents far from me)
to wrap around the ribs of an animal raised by a friend
not transported hundreds of miles because you see I am
trying to help you stay strong undiminished by the carbon
footprint that’s become a number I calculate to know
(16 metric tons average per person in the U.S.
4 metric tons average per person globally)
what it is I’ve done, to be sure
to be sure

Bless me Mother Earth for once I began
to see I couldn’t stop seeing the bits
of shredded blue tarp in our garden soil
the plastic plant labels, potting trays
plant pots, wheelbarrow, toothbrush, toothpaste tube,
trellis netting, lawn chairs, dish soap, hand soap bottles…..

Forgive me for—still —I have not refused
the job that requires I drive my fossil fuel fed
car three hundred more miles a week and I am
guilty too of turning the thermostat
to 58 degrees in the first sudden cold days
of fall using the oil extracted from deep
within your body our invasion our intrusion
thinking we can take whatever we want

You see there is so much more
so very, very much more I could say
I’ve only just begun but
Dear Mother Earth

let me not forget to say how deep
is my gratitude for your green
fields out my back window, your woods
in which I walk and wonder and pray, your tenacious
dandelion, eureka of forsythia, pink
and orange flame of tulips in the yard
before me stirring delight
in this long awaited for
spring day.

Denise Pendleton holds an MFA in Poetry from Washington University and is a recipient of The Jinx Walker Poetry Prize of the Academy of the American Poets. Her poems have appeared in American Sports Poems edited by May Swenson and Northwest Review, Tar River Poetry, and Kerning among others. Pendleton has taught writing to college students and held a variety of nonprofit jobs as an educator “from the balcony” to promote reading for all ages.