

# Nature Writing for the Common Good

A collection of essays on nature, ecological challenges,  
and connections between people and places.

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This is a collection of essays from previously unpublished authors, following a call for entries devised by Ian Christie and Kate Oakley.

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## Foreword

What is the nature of prosperity? That deceptively simple question motivates our work in the Centre for the Understanding of Prosperity (CUSP). What can prosperity possibly mean on a finite planet? How can we lead decent, healthy, fulfilling lives in ways that don't trash the climate or lead to a catastrophic decline in biodiversity? What does it mean to live well and to be well, to flourish and to thrive, and to do so in ways that don't jeopardise the world we leave to our children? These are the questions that motivate our research and structure our work programme.<sup>1</sup>

To inquire into the nature of something is also, of course, to ask about the relationship between that something and the natural world. To understand the nature of prosperity we must explore the 'prosperity of nature'. That task goes beyond science or economics. It demands an engagement with humanities and the arts. If it is to mean anything at all the prosperity of nature has as much to do with the beauty of the natural world as it does with its integrity and its function. The scientist stands before the intricacy of nature and asks 'how?'. The artist stands before its majesty and breathes 'wow!'.

Nature writing has its roots in a seamless elision between the 'how?' and the 'wow!'. The writer often seen as the originator of the genre was a country parson living an unostentatious life in the village of Selborne, just a few miles away from the University of Surrey where CUSP has its base. Gilbert White's collection of letters and essays on *The Natural History of Selborne* was enormously popular when it was first published in 1788 and has remained in print ever since. It once held claim to being the fourth most published work in the English language, after the Bible, Shakespeare and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. That was before Harry Potter arrived on the scene, of course.<sup>2</sup>

The progression of White's work is fascinating. It started out as a minute observational diary of local flora and fauna. It evolved into an increasingly poetic expression of the prosperity of nature. Perhaps because he straddled the two worlds, his writing was hugely influential on both scientists and artists. Darwin and Wordsworth both professed to have been swayed by him, even as art and the sciences began to diverge from each other. Accurate typology and florid prose don't easily live together, perhaps. As science increasingly sought its legitimacy in 'fact', enchantment became the domain of poetry and romance.

The schism was never as definitive as its architects intended. But it led to a curious divergence between two competing myths about nature. In one of them the natural world is the site of a violent, never-ending struggle for survival—Tennyson's 'nature, red in tooth and claw'. In the other, 'Mother Nature' is a rural idyll, beneficent and infinitely kind to us. The fate of these myths through the course of the 19th and early 20th Century was a curious one. Violence embedded itself in science and economics. Beneficence retired to the domain of romance and poetry. Science became gendered to its core, dominated by masculine memes of struggle. Economics became obsessed with competition.

Desperate to re-enchante the world, nature writing worked itself into an impossible corner, ripe for parody. And parody duly arrived in 1932, in the form of Stella Gibbons' comic novel *Cold Comfort Farm*. For several decades after the novel was published, argues the nature writer Robert Macfarlane, nature writing itself went into retreat.<sup>3</sup> Poetic descriptions of the natural world were hard to sustain in the wake of Gibbons' satire. But there is, it seems, something irrepressible, inescapable even, in our need to convey the natural world in words. To fathom its mystery. To exalt its beauty. To tame its cruelty. To understand its existential cycle of birth and decay. The end of the 20th Century and the first decade of this one saw a powerful re-emergence of the genre.

In its revitalised form, 'new nature writing'—as it has become known—acquired some novel traits. Still present was the poetic natural history writer—the 'gentleman observer' of former times. But new nature writing was also deeply informed by the ecological crisis in which we now find ourselves. One strand of writing engages in political dissent against the ravages of capitalism. Another mourns the losses that assault the natural world. A third seeks an almost therapeutic solace in our fragile connection to what remains. As my CUSP colleagues Ian

Christie and Kate Oakley highlighted in their call for contributions to this collection, there is a sense in which new nature writing is ‘a huge rolling process of documentation of what we have lost, what we love, and what we fear we will lose next.’<sup>4</sup>

The resurgent genre is by no means free from controversy or even immune to parody. On the contrary it seems to be a more contested domain than ever. One of the most telling critiques relates to diversity. Kathleen Jamie reacts against a continuing dominance of nature writing by educated, white men. ‘What’s that coming over the hill?’ she asks, in breathless imitation of a certain breathless nature documentary narrator. ‘A white, middle-class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male! From Cambridge!’<sup>5</sup>

The caricature may be cruel. The point is clear. Diversity matters. Our relationship to the natural world cannot remain the preserve of elites. Who writes and who gets published; who listens and who gets listened to: these things matter deeply in a world tormented by inequalities of race and gender, income and access. The prosperity of nature is an empty promise if it remains inaccessible to the poorest in society.

Diversity was one of our principal aims for this collection of essays. And it’s clearly something we have at least partially achieved. There is considerable diversity of background, age and circumstance, within this volume. Much less diversity in gender, as it happens. Not a single one of our authors falls into the category that Jamie derides. All of our writers are women. Taken against a backdrop dominated by the Lone Enraptured Male, we should probably count that as a success.

There was something else we were looking for in this call. One of our themes in CUSP is the role of the arts in achieving a sustainable prosperity. CUSP researchers Malaika Cunningham and Marit Hammond have argued that artistic creativity is exactly what is needed to begin to imagine and negotiate a better world. The writer Lucy Neal too has pointed to the role of the ‘citizen artist’ as an agent of change. ‘When the facts and figures of climate change cannot catalyse the shifts needed in our world,’ she writes, ‘the arts can open us to different ways of seeing and feeling, creating emergent space to rethink the future and change the world—collectively.’<sup>7</sup> Our nature writing call set out specifically to explore this idea. How can nature writing contribute to the common good, we wanted to know? Could writing about nature ‘help generate a collective and popular politics of conservation and connection’, asked Kate Oakley and Ian Christie.

There is a danger of course that, in searching within art for the change that science has so far failed to deliver, we end up instrumentalising both art and artists. That would be a mistake. And it certainly wasn’t our intention. On the contrary, it’s a central hypothesis in CUSP that art itself is intrinsic to our prosperity. Creativity is something without which human beings cannot truly be said to thrive. The nature of prosperity is in its essence creative.

None of our authors has fallen into the trap of instrumentalising art. In fact, there is less obvious evidence than we might have hoped for here to support the idea that nature writing can play any direct role in activism. The essays that follow don’t call on us to renounce capitalism. They don’t incite revolution. They don’t represent any particular call to arms at all. But there is nonetheless something compelling to emerge from this handful of pieces from unpublished authors.

One strand picks up on the therapeutic vein that runs through new nature writing. Claire Mascall, Caroline Bateson and Sophie Lawson explore the extraordinary restorative power of nature in coping with trauma and loss. Not, as might be expected, through some elegiac appreciation of ethereal beauty. Almost the opposite. It is as much the falling leaves and the sodden earth, the scent of decay and its whispers of mortality that somehow elicit comfort. Dazzled occasionally by shafts of light. But content to find solace in the earth.

A sense of the ordinary made extraordinary is echoed by those authors who reflect on the prosperity of nature in urban environments. Liz Child, Orlaith Delargy and Mahima Sukhdev each find fascination in the endless creativity of nature’s uneasy relationship with brick and concrete. ‘Life doesn’t burst here, it wavers.’ Or else it seeks its prosperity ‘on the y-axis’ of a high-rise city neighbourhood. But we’re reminded too, that these survival strategies depend



to some extent on our own, sometimes amateur role as the custodians of nature's possibilities. And sometimes as their executioner.

Almost all of the essays convey the deeply personal nature of our relationships to nature. Words are both a mirror and a prism. Writing about anything teaches us as much about ourselves as it does about the object of our attention, as Jacqueline Hitt and Frances Voelcker both intimate. So does our fascination with nature. We are uneasy in the face of its cruelty. We are moved by its frailty. We are comforted by its cycles of renewal. These emotions matter to us. Nature needs saving, not just for its own sake, but for ours, our authors imply.

There is something in the totality of these essays which reminds me of another writer, not normally regarded as a nature writer, but a close contemporary of Gilbert White. In around 1750, Christopher Smart was about the most famous man in London—a celebrated poet and satirist; and a key figure in 18th Century society. A few years later, after an uneasy relationship with alcohol, he was incarcerated in an asylum for 'praying too fervently in public'.

Languishing in unimaginable conditions for almost 5 years, he composed two of the most extraordinary poems in the English language, the chaotic and charismatic *Jubilate Agno*, and the haunting, elegiac *Song to David*.<sup>8</sup> Both poems express something profound. That language is not just a lens through which we see the world. It is the means through which we continually build and rebuild it. To shape our words to the language of nature, as Smart does in his two asylum poems, is to align ourselves once again with the sly logic and slow rhythm of the planet. It's an idea that Joanna Gerrard comes closest to, perhaps, in her moving reflection on autism, nature and time. But it is a truth inherent in all the pieces you will find in the following pages.

Perhaps what we have here is, after all, a form of activism. Perhaps it contains the seeds if not of revolution then of transformation. These essays are the personal responses of unpublished writers to a casual 'new nature writing' challenge thrown out by CUSP a year or so ago. Their fragmented, kaleidoscopic brilliance reveals a fundamental truth: to train our poetry on the prosperity of nature is exactly what is needed if we are to reframe—and retrieve—the nature of prosperity.

Tim Jackson  
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#### Notes

- 1 | For more information, see: [www.cusp.ac.uk](http://www.cusp.ac.uk).
- 2 | Mabey, R 1996. Gilbert White—a biography of the author of The Natural History of Selborne. London: Profile Books.
- 3 | Macfarlane, R 2003. Call of the Wild. The Guardian. Online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview34>.
- 4 | See: <https://www.cusp.ac.uk/themes/a/blog-ic-ko-nnw/>. See also: Oakley, Ward and Christie 2018. Engaging the imagination: 'new nature writing', collective politics and the environmental crisis. Environmental Values 27 (6): 687-705; and *Afterword* of this collection.
- 5 | See: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n05/kathleen-jamie/a-lone-enraptured-male>.
- 6 | Hammond, M 2019. Sustainability as a cultural transformation: the role of deliberative democracy, Environmental Politics. DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2019.1684731.
- 7 | Neal, L 2015. Playing for Time: Making Art as If the World Mattered. London: Oberon.
- 8 | Mounsey, C. 2001. Christopher Smart—Clown of God. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press. See also: [https://timjackson.org.uk/plays/tj\\_language-of-flowers](https://timjackson.org.uk/plays/tj_language-of-flowers).



## Where the Kites Fly

Mahima Sukhdev

The city is loud: sometimes it buzzes, sometimes it blares, but all the time it makes itself heard. And Mumbai, with its 18 million people crammed into a narrow strip of land, is louder than most.

When nature lands here, she falls seamlessly in step with the anonymous droves flowing along the roads. In the city, she's an urbanite: she hasn't got time for frivolities, she doesn't linger for longer than she needs to, and she dresses practically, wearing only sensible shoes.

I grew up with nature in this apparition.

When I was two years old, I would ask to go to "*budgie ke yahan*," which can be literally translated to "budgie's place". Budgie's place was the Bombay Gymkhana, a local sports club that my parents would frequent, ostensibly to play badminton, but really just to spend time outside of our cramped little apartment, where they could hear the sound of horns from the traffic below, despite being on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor.

In the Gymkhana there was a dusty playground, with a metal slide and a plastic swing-set and a budgerigar in a cage. I would spend hours watching the colourful bird while my parents sat on white wicker chairs, sipped on fresh lime sodas, and watched me. My parents loved telling this story, and I liked it when they told it because it reaffirmed a belief I held to be true: that I am—have always been—a nature lover.

I held this belief gingerly though, somewhat apologetically. I was, after all, a child born of concrete. The World Health Organization recommends at least 20 square meters of green space (parks, gardens, green belts, etc.) per capita in big cities. London has

an abundant 50 square meters per capita, Delhi has 15, and Mumbai has two. In this crowded city, where could a love for nature come from? Where could it turn to? My indulgence in nature was amateur, a series of false starts and misdirected fervour, like a hatchling imprinting on the wrong mother.

## **The Plague**

In 1994, a plague swept through India via Mumbai, claiming many lives. It was an all-consuming emergency: we were at war. The newspapers ran front-page stories about the plague almost every day. Events were cancelled, people stayed indoors, the hustle-bustle of our city was muted, like someone had turned a giant dial and lowered the volume. One morning, the whole school was gathered in the assembly hall, and our principal invited a fat, moustached man onto the stage. He wore a suit and looked uncomfortably hot, or maybe he just hated public-speaking. He spoke to us for a long time though, in a serious tone, using big words that most of us didn't understand: "Bubonic", he said. The hungry girls thought of bourbon biscuits. "Yersinia pestis" he said. The Christian girls thought of Latin prayers. "Vectors", he said. The older girls thought of maths class probably. We shuffled out of the assembly hall, fearful but also a bit excited: we were starting to develop egos and understand history, and for the first time in our young lives, we felt like we might be a part of the story of the world.

While most of my friends were celebrating the unexpected school holidays, I was quietly concerned about the plight of the city's rats, innocent carriers of the deadly disease. Everybody suddenly hated them. We had shared our city with these creatures: we went about our days, they went about theirs. We dared not question their decision to migrate to Mumbai: that would inevitably lead to more introspective questions we didn't want to ask ourselves, about waste, or scarcity, or nativism. The rats were common enough that we were not actually afraid—we'd shriek when we saw them of course, but mostly out of habit. But now there was a growing intolerance: they spoke about rats with a vitriolic rage I couldn't understand. Couldn't they see that they meant no harm? And the rats were dying as well, in great numbers. The plague came and went, and the newspapers never published the rat death count. I thought of them being poisoned, becoming suddenly inert on the roadside like little balls of grey cottonwool.

*"There was a little mouse,  
Who used to live in my house  
But in the news one day,  
They were very sad to say,  
That plague was causing death in our city—  
I stamped my foot and took pity,  
I went into my house and decided to kill the mouse  
But later that day I felt ashamed  
Because I forgot to ask his name."*

– Me, age 6

I wrote this clumsy poem, barely able to express what I was feeling. In my big city, for the first time, I saw people turn against nature in fear.

## **The Prison**

At the beginning of the monsoon season, when the rains had newly flushed out the sub-surfaces of the city, I collected five slugs that were loitering near the carpark beneath our 18-storey building. I put them in a shoebox, and proudly installed the shoebox in our living room. They were our first pets. With a planning horizon typical of my age—now seven—it was only once the slugs were housed that I became concerned with what they would need to eat. This was before the internet era, so I trawled through encyclopaedias searching for this information in vain, becoming increasingly panicked. My mother assured me if we just created a bedding of mud in the shoebox, and threw in some leaves and small plants, they'd be alright. These were procured late at night

from a small grassy area at the entrance of our building—the watchman on duty leaned on his cane and looked out at us with mild curiosity, though careful to avert his eyes whenever we looked back.

I took good care of my slug pets: I poked small holes in the top of the shoebox so they could get some light, I dutifully refreshed their mud-bed every few days, and I replenished their food supplies—mostly decomposing leaves, of which there were plenty brought down by the heavy rains. I gave them all names, and I could tell them all apart too. If you spend enough time with any group of animals, you’ll notice the things that make each one unique: the thickness of the white line along their backs, the shape of their tentacles, the frilliness of their skirts. Once I got comfortable with them, I started to let them free on the kitchen floor for a while so they could get some fresh air and exercise—time out of cell, so to speak.

Alas—once they had tasted freedom, there was no turning back. The details of the incident are fuzzy in my memory, and my mother cannot seem to verify the facts, but one night, four of the five slugs escaped the shoebox. They didn’t make their way very far across our beige living room carpet, and the slime trails they left behind meant it was particularly easy to trace and then apprehend them. Someone had perhaps not put the shoebox lid on right.

Instead of swathes of manure, I had my slugs’ ghostly midnight trails. Instead of vast grassy fields, I had a few carpet knots per square inch. But in my big city, I reared animals with my own routines and rituals.

## **The Hanging Gardens**

We were in a dense thicket. We stepped over thick roots, and the dirt path ahead narrowed as the underbrush took over. For a chaotic moment we were wielding our arms like machetes, pushing aside branches in our way. We might have been in a rainforest, but for the occasional wail of a police siren. And then, abruptly, we spilled out into a sunny patch of manicured lawn. In the centre of it, there was a giant boot. The boot was made from stone and brick, and there was an entrance on one side. I climbed up to the top of the boot to look out over the Hanging Gardens of Mumbai. It was fantastical: I was Alice, and this was my Wonderland.

The benefit of being little is that the spaces around you appear endlessly large. The majestic Hanging Gardens, I now know, is a small but much-loved terraced garden and park perched on top of Mumbai’s Malabar Hill.

“Why is it called Hanging Gardens, Papa?” I asked as we stood at the lookout point, the Arabian Sea beneath us, and the shimmering outlines of Mumbai’s skyscrapers beyond. “It’s named after the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Babylon was a great and ancient city, once the centre of the world. And the trees and plants in this garden weren’t rooted in the earth, they were all raised up, at different levels. That’s why they’re said to be ‘hanging’.”

My early visits to the Hanging Gardens were driven by a desire to explore, to experience a little patch of nature. Later, I would come to see the trips as a necessity.

*Adenanthera pavonina*. A perennial tree, commonly known as ‘Red Lucky Seed’, abundant in the Hanging Gardens. The ground was scattered with thousands of their red, disc-like seeds. “Like Smarties”, my little sister once pointed out. They were as bright, as glossy, and as uniform—just missing the chocolate centre. We started collecting these seeds—a handful at a time at first—and we kept them in matchboxes and played games with them. But they soon caught the fancy of the other girls at our school. The seeds were beautiful and versatile—they could be strung into necklaces, used for artwork, or simply collected and displayed. We went back to the Hanging Gardens to harvest more, and our stores moved from matchboxes to glass jars. They became a form of currency for trade with our friends: we’d exchange them for stickers,



collectible toys, and even for favours: you let me copy your homework, I'll give you 20 seeds.

After that, whenever I visited the Hanging Gardens I would only be fixated on the ground, eyes wide in a state of hungered frenzy, scanning for seeds.

In my big city, I experienced a small piece of wilderness and marvelled at its many mysteries. And then I learnt how to reap the fruits of nature for my own gain, and it changed how I saw the wilderness.

### **The Petition**

I carefully folded the pages of the petition together and put them in a big brown envelope, along with the covering letter. "300 signatures," I said to myself proudly. Surely the Chinese ambassador would give our petition the attention it deserved. It was 1997, and we were waking up to the realisation that India's tigers were really and truly threatened with extinction. One big reason for this was the illegal trade in tiger parts, and most of the demand for tiger parts came from China.

I had spent the last few weeks going from classroom to classroom, and lunch table to lunch table, collecting signatures. Most of the girls, welcoming any break from regular classwork and fickle friends, enthusiastically signed the petition. My earliest understanding of how the real world worked—globalisation, supply and demand, the role of diplomacy—came from putting this petition together. None of the girls cared to test my half-baked knowledge of the above: all I had to say was "the tigers are going extinct, and we have to save them—sign here" and they'd look up at me, worried expressions between tightly-braided pigtails, and scrawl their names on the paper. We were old enough to be worried about the future, but young enough not to know scepticism.

I had never seen a tiger in the wild: barely any of us had. Yet our collective imaginations were teeming with images of the tiger. India's national animal. The saffron colour in our flag. The Goddess Durga's trusty steed. The villain in 'The Jungle Book'. The hero in 'The Tiger Who Came to Tea'. My bedroom wall was plastered with photos of tigers cut out from magazines, and a map of India showing all the national parks. I was a nature lover, and a patriot.

In those same magazines, pundits compared the growth rates and outlooks of India and China, pitting the two rising powers against each other. I wondered if there was a Chinese girl out there who worried about the integrity of the Chinese Zodiac if the Tiger went extinct, and was reduced to a fictional beast like the Dragon, to be found only in picture books and re-conceived at festivals.

In my big city, I realised that believing is not about seeing, and that nature can be about your country, your religion, even the positions of the stars. And I fought for the idea of nature.

### **The God of the Sky**

I would gaze out of the window of our Mumbai apartment often: the scent of the cool sea breeze lured me over, and the sight of the kites soaring overhead kept me transfixed, in a meditative state, as the colour of the evening turned from yellow, to orange, to purple. The clothes lines and rooftops below us, and our beige living room carpet, changed colours too.

There were really only three birds one would see regularly in the city: the crow, the sparrow, and the kite. They were all decidedly urban birds: generations ago, their ancestors had left behind their quiet lives in the forest and moved to Mumbai, city of dreams, city of extremes, maximum city.

The crow was an ugly, angry bird: a bird of landfill sites and rotten things. Intelligent, yes, resourceful, definitely, but not likeable. He didn't even bother pretending he was a bird. He didn't prefer a tree to a trash heap.

The sparrow was in my mind a more recent migrant: she retained a little countryside charm, a melodic song reminiscent of another world. She was small and jittery, and didn't get too close to humans.

But the kite: the kite was the God of the sky. The kite was both long-term urban resident and altogether transcendent. The kite flew above us all, not involved in the mess we made beneath. An elegant, fierce bird that conjured up all the images of freedom and power an eagle would. Better than an eagle though—the kite had made it in the big city.

And the kite reminded me that there will be life anywhere we allow life to be. And in my big city, with only two meters of green space per capita, nature thrived on the Y-axis: in a shoebox on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor, in the terraced gardens on top of hill, in the saffron on a flag hoisted high and proudly unfurled, and in the space between the tallest skyscraper and the stratosphere, where the kites fly.

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## Adagio for Belonging

Joanna Gerrard

Road cones. Rows of brake lights. Clutch cramp. Adverts thrust through retinas and scratch away at the hippocampus: spend, spend, spend. Stimulate with caffeine, anaesthetise with alcohol: *métro, boulot, dodo*. Fast food, express checkout, pre-packed, pre-peeled, pay-at-pumps, click & collect, attention limited to 240 characters and excused for concision. We demand speed under the guise of convenience. Reside in box-shaped houses with box-shaped windows, drive box-shaped cars, live box-shaped lives—leave the world in box-shaped coffins. We are isolated entities all swimming in the same direction: marketed, branded, judged, and sold. We are too lost in stimulation to care for everyday subtleties.

My school reports echoed the same sentiments: ‘enigmatic, shy, never smiles.’ I am autistic but it took thirty-six years to get the badge. It’s now a cumbersome weight—juxtaposed with relief. The Maori word for autism is ‘*Takiwatanga*’. It means: ‘In his/her own time and space’. In six syllables it epitomises the essence of what it’s like. I’m not fit for purpose in a Society of Speed. I have a three-second delay when someone speaks, little understanding of nuances and social cues, and most human company is exhausting. The psychiatrist said I’m moderate functioning, however I believe I swing wildly from high to zero. Some days I can slip smoothly into social norms, other days I’m unable to leave the house. I find solace in the non-human world. This is a panacea for complete withdrawal.

Hegel said the familiar, precisely because it is familiar, is not known. It’s a façade and one of the most subtle and destructive forms of human alienation. We miss the strange things that await us. We tame, control, and forget the mystery. The mortal world is fused and woven with another; we don’t have to travel vast distances to seek ‘The Wild’. The wilderness is there and is persistently trying to reclaim the ground it has lost.

I look out into the garden; the various abandoned attempts at gentle landscaping. Thirty years of dog ownership has hindered the opportunity for a well-ordered lawn—but this has been an unveiling—the secrets large paws uncover; dust away a little soil and you'll find roots and bones.

The grass has a long established canine desire path, first crafted in 1987 and continued to the present—different dogs, same trail. Elsewhere other tracks have been created: dug out holes under fences, sheds, doors, walls; the garden is a network of commuter routes, supermarkets, and homes—it is a microcosm of our own daily travels. The beasts that frequent the garden, mysterious night dwellers, I've had little contact with. I've spotted foxes, hedgehogs, and have heard rumours from neighbours that there are badgers. Rats reside in the garage and cause no problems; they are self-sufficient and rarely seen. They cling close to walls, and keep an equilibrium within the boundaries; they are predators and the predated. The autumn brings aerial displays of bats dancing in the twilight. I often wonder what the bats are trying to tell us, but they vanish before I can understand.

The garden has been consistent in my life; it has grown up with me. In 1987 my sister and I planted an acorn each, the oaks are now seven-feet tall. Oaks do not abide by the Society of Speed rules, unlike the silver birch.

*Betula Pendula*, or *Beith*, is the first symbol of the Ogham alphabet and is said to be full of the light of the god Lugh. It was one of the first trees to recolonise our landscape after the last ice age. It is termed by botanists as a 'pioneer species', as the wind-blown seeds are quick to disperse to form new woodland along with hazel and rowan. In total, 235 species of lichen, 30 mosses, 28 liverworts, and 103 fungi have been recorded on birch trees. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the 1802 poem *The Picture or the Lover's Resolution* paid homage to this tree; 'Beneath a weeping birch (most beautiful of forest trees, the Lady of the Woods).'

The Lady stands approximately forty-feet in the garden; a tall, slender spectre with its knotted silvery bark and its northern side dressed in ivy. In autumn the leaves are like pennants of gold coins; in winter the thin branches hang down like witches hair. There is a Welsh phrase, '*dod yn ôl at fy nghoed*' meaning 'to return to a balanced state of mind'. It literally translates '*to return to my trees*'. This is to sit beside this Lady who is like a foreboding guardian of the garden.

Cuckoopint grows underneath its canopy in the spring—an echo of an ancient woodland reverberating through the soil. I worry for the trees. Many ancient woodlands and landscapes nearby have been flattened by flimsy housing, tarmac, and industrial units; victims to uniformed rigidity that many expect Nature to be; a pastiche, a convenience—neat, tidy, and tame.

The short days are lit with a low, bright sun, and the garden is in contrast—the barren beech, apple, and hawthorns mix with the green holly, mahonia, fir trees, skimmia, and ivy. Snowdrops have broken through the soil and their long green stems stand several inches tall. The leafless winter flowering viburnum still has a show of pink petals. The birds pluck the pyracantha berries out from its thorny cage, and leopard slugs chew their way through compost. Dormancy above the surface conceals the seeds we've sown for warmer days. Already next year's sedums are lying in wait for sunnier climes.

December is when the birds sing again; they establish territories, stock up on food, and more visible on the leafless trees; it's time to enjoy the fluttering and songs amongst the branches. While many have burrowed deep, the fight for food is fierce at the feeders: starlings squabble amongst themselves, sparrows dip in-between; blackbirds barge all out the way; a robin drops down amongst the leaves, a goldcrest slips through the feeder cage, and goldfinches gorge on nygers. A portly wood pigeon waddles through the fallen leaves, its own tranquility is seldom to be ruffled. The gulls have moved inland, but it's the flock of parakeets that make the most noise. These non-native birds have flourished in the area and a more common sight than woodpeckers that were once regulars. It's those who can adapt that survive and thrive.

A beat of wings as a pigeon plough takes off. Silence descends. No bird is in sight; they have scuttled off into the shadows. The weight of the oppressive winter sky bears down and a winged darkling swoops like I was its prey. It lands. Its talons grip the mustard coloured lichen-lined roof: a sparrowhawk. Slightly mottled brown and grey, her beak curved—perfect for tearing flesh and sinew; she asserts a quiet authority despite being an interloper. She surveys the platter and selects a *plat du jour*; perhaps a plump pigeon or a collared dove. She doesn't stop for long and launches off into the direction of the fields.

Like trees, the older we get the deeper our roots. As I veer closer to middle-age the draw to ancestors is prevalent; the gravity of life pulls harder, and the need to belong grows greater. We are just palimpsests—our past family are ghosts of who we are. My nan was a keen gardener and an expert with herbs. A compress of comfrey for a sprain, feverfew for migraines, borage for pyrexia, and lavender for practically everything. She told stories of beautiful Welsh cousins who, at dawn, would wash their faces with dew collected from the leaves of Lady's Mantle. This folklore is the library of the land. When she was alive I showed little interest in plants, however now I sit for hours hunched over pots as I prick out seedlings like she did: meticulous, patient, adept. My dog instinctively knows to find certain plants in the garden when he has an upset stomach, and taught my other dog to do the same. Blue tits put mint leaves in their nests to ward off bacteria, therefore promoting health in their chicks, whereas jackdaws are not born with innate fear of predators—they have to be taught by their elders. Just like my nan who taught me what herbs are best for certain ailments, we pass down information from one generation to benefit another.

However much we try and put it into a box, nature adapts, changes, it alters according to need; its dormancy may appear like death but even seeds found within glaciers have grown several thousand years later. In 1963, during 'The Big Freeze', hundreds and thousands of birds perished, however, within five years populations recovered as two to three broods were hatched annually to make-up for the shortfall. As we humans are part of nature, we too must adapt for our, and other species', survival. Our existence is dependent on symbiosis, nothing is complete by itself. We are all interconnected so must acknowledge our own actions and what the consequences might be.

My dog's body, like us, are landscapes of where we have been: lines, crevices, scars: they are maps. The fur on his elbows curl naturally into a spiral. It is logarithmic, like a spiral galaxy or a nautilus shell. In his fur I see a universe of geometry. Fibonacci sequences appear in the branching of trees, leaves on a stem, on pineapples, the flowering of an artichoke, florets of a sunflower. Are we just mathematical equations? Are we something kindred with all of Nature, if we too share the same geometry as a dog, a silver birch, a blue tit, a conch—are we all logarithmic—not meant to be confined in boxes? As Blake wrote: 'Infinity implies intimacy: To see a world in a grain of sand ... Hold infinity in the palm of your hand.'

About a foot deep in my garden there is a solid layer of chalk and flint; once I dug up a large lump of amethyst, other times there are terracotta, porcelain, glass, bone, and other remnants of how the land had previously been turned. I position large rocks I've dug up as temporary borders along with trunks of dead trees that are swathed in a carpet of moss and fungi. Between the stones grow feverfew, ragwort, brambles, and nettles. A pair of chaffinches hop along the stones up to the pond and give their feathers a quick sprinkle. Underneath the stones are centipedes, slugs, worms, woodlice—each of the cold grey rocks is a micro ecosystem, a pathway—an area of fecundity.

From the cracks in the brickwork bursts lungwort, chives, and euphorbia; last years strawberries shot out runners and rooted between paving slabs; an ash and a sycamore have nestled between the concrete and have so far eluded human intervention. The ivy has eased its way through the fence panels, prising them apart and splitting the wood—I'm under no illusion that with a few weeks of absent humans this garden would be reclaimed by The Wild that waits patiently in the periphery.



Inside, house mice have carved their way through the walls, doors, and furniture. They scuttle along skirting, worktops, and often take food wrappers for a walk. There is something exhilarating about a small rodent with black moon-shaped eyes attempt to pull half a chocolate bar through a crevice in the brickwork. The broken eaves on the pitch roof are roosts for bats, and the rotting wood-framed sun lounge is home to many species of spider, from funnel-webs to false widows. The house breaths life, where the humans who live inside are failing in health, other creatures are thriving. The shed at the end of the garden has a hole in the roof that has given access to generations of robins to nest in; our own negligence has been to the advantage of the non-human.

On days I cannot leave my house, my solitude is not loneliness. I know in the garden there is symbiosis, which I am part of, and live between the weave of unfolding worlds. The conspiracy of the common place enchants this land, but scratch beneath this familiarity leads the eye to a kind of chase. Time doesn't stop, it slows to an oak's pace—*takiwatanga*.

To sit under the silver birch is to be grounded to something belonging to another time, it is a palimpsest of something far more ancient.

The Society of Speed is white noise, it's a destructive distraction. Technology has severed our ties to the soil beneath our feet, and materialism has become a religion of the machine we live in. We should shift away from our minds and look into our hearts. Blinded by an age of enlightenment, by cold science, we rationalise things too quickly. Using our hearts doesn't mean romance and sentimentalism, it means intuition and empathy. Our hearts have been switched to standby for too long.

I sit and watch the birds present completely to where they are; they are attuned to the rhythm of the earth. They do not interfere; birds are what they are—they have no pretence. The Wild is all around us, we just have to learn to let it in and embrace all its rough edges and perceived untidiness; one's mess is another's home. Let's shun the Society of Speed. Let's stop, sit, listen—slope back to an oak's pace and see The Wild grow back and let it envelop us.

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Jo Gerrard studied 'Wild Writing: Language, Literature, and the Environment' Masters degree at University of Essex and is about to embark on a PhD. Jo is also a student of Group Voice Sound Therapy, and is interested in how both nature and voice can have positive effects on our health.



## **The Common**

Claire Mascall

I was five years old when I first padded onto the peach carpets of my grandparent's new house. Stepping out onto the back patio, I saw that the house was edged on two sides by dense strips of mature woodland; oak, hazel and holly. The garden felt to my small self as if sunk in a towering, tree-flickering wilderness. Shortly after this visit there began a slow unravelling of all that was permanent to me when my mother became ill, step by excruciating step.

One morning the following year, I was woken early by my father's voice on the phone to my grandmother: "All right Mum, we'll come over now". It was five o'clock in the morning. As I stepped into my grandparents' now-familiar house I could hear the distant sound of crying at the dining room table. After having been refused permission to clear a section of the woodland that surrounds the house, the landowner had brought in a team with chainsaws to cut down a copse of oak trees. They had arrived at dawn so that they could not be stopped. The situation appealed vividly to my desperate, six-year-old's understanding of the unfairness of the world; of land ownership, and of the inability of trees to harden their bark against the loud, screeching chainsaws that we could hear in the background.

Three years later, my grandfather died suddenly, on the same awful day that my mother and father were told that there was nothing more that could be done to save her. Five years on, when I was fourteen, my father, brother and I moved into my grandparents' house, still backed by a dense strip of copse down one side. Soon after we moved, I left the house, alone, for the first time. A few hundred yards down the road and the road became a track, before the track became a squashy path of wet sand, black as treacle.

The path forked and I experienced mild elation, as a young woman who had not yet

been able to choose a route to walk alone in relative wilderness, at the freedom of deciding which fork to take; the one under the glossy, shady holly tunnels to the bridge, or the red, sandy serpent through hulking gorse. I chose the latter, and as the path humped over the roots of a skewed oak tree I noticed how the sand granulated from red to the grey of dark steel. In this slowed act of 'noticing' I felt a faint rip, a pull of the muscles around my ears as I relaxed, and my shoulders balanced weightily toward the ground.

I stepped from the winding path densely packed each side by gorse and pine, out on to the expansive vista of heathland. Gradients of colour and hue lapped as if paper-made in layers ahead of me, Blackdown inked steep and permanent in the distance. My lungs filled with the sweet air and it felt as though it was my first breath.

It was late June and the heather was black and strong, gathering strength for August when the flowers beat into their vibrant capsules of purple, pink and white. The black, claggy sand under the heather seemed as a sink to absorb the churned, blackened feelings in my stomach that had sat with me during lessons that day; I felt lightness. I was fourteen years old, and my dear, beautiful mother had gone.

Every day I grew up more. I became different and more able to understand, and I could not comprehend it; I could not settle with what I had lost. At home, we talked of her often, and we grew with the happiest memories of her. Left unspoken was the terrible, debilitating decline of her illness and what it did to her, what it did to us; for each of us a uniquely acute pain.

I turned right, along a wide track lumped with creamy rocks. Squirrels galloped low to the ground, in and out of the woodland on each side of the track. Just before the track curved a tall, impossibly lent white poplar scooped my eyes upwards to its crown; three-lobed spades fluttered white-green up and down the trunk, marked by spots in perfect, dark brown lines. I wondered whether the tree was diseased, or had been vandalised.

Over the next years I often cycled to school along the track that wound through the heaths and forests that made up the common. I saw the dotted poplar grow, and shed its leaves, and grow again, and I learned about its bark and its unusual markings.

It was a long way to school so I cycled fast. Speeding through the seasons I saw, in order, profusions of green, crackles of colour, how the black sand hardened as crystal, and the cold, dead sound it made when I cycled over dry branches hidden in the leaf litter. In winter, rain, sleet and snow drifted over the heath and solidified the black, peaty water to thick, glassy craters among the wrought iron spindles of the heather plants. My father, brother and I spent hours of hilarity skating across these frozen pools, falling, laughing, holding on to each other; recovering in the mist.

When winter was over, school friends joined me in watching sand lizards that warmed themselves on the damp, greening boardwalk across the wet heath, inches above the orange-black water. In summer we ate the yellow gorse flowers that tasted of coconut, we stayed out late under the stars. In that place, with those people, at that time, I saw the natural cycles of life and death; of tragedy in enormous, flooded ant's nests, ants pushing to safety their young in their tiny white eggs. I saw rotting and destruction, renewal, recovery, and hope. I felt an unexpected healing that was inextricably connected to that place—to the common.

At age sixteen, I travelled with a neighbour and school friend to Uganda where we worked in an area of temporary housing just outside the capital, Kampala. Though home to hundreds of people, being at the edge of a fast-expanding city the area was under continual threat of development. The dusty jungle imprinted on my mind a gnawing contrast to my bustling English village; the instability of their situation was behind each anxious conversation, apparent in every overcrowded home. The understanding that we could not help them in any real, long-term way was defining for

me; that against the will of corporation and commerce, of politics and money they had no voice—they did not exist.

On coming home we walked the common for hours. The feeling of permanence, of immovable years, and of stability was tangible to us then. We knew that the common was valued; as a nature reserve it was protected. It was safe: we were safe.

When I was twenty-two, my grandmother, who had become to me everything that my mother should have been, passed away. As soon as the call ended from the hospital, from my father, I walked down the road, which turned to a track, and then to a small, sandy path. I chose which fork to walk down, out on to the breath-taking tracts of heathland. I walked to the small cemetery filled with heather, where my grandfather was buried, and I felt calm, and peaceful, and desperately sad.

Before he died, my grandfather suffered from depression for thirty long years, speculatively attributed to his being sent to boarding school in England at age five. The war separated him from his parents until boats could once again go back and forth from Sri Lanka, where his family remained. I remember him as a quiet man, always working in the garden or out walking the dog on these heathlands.

At the cemetery I remembered how, a year before she passed away, my grandmother had told me the story of how she and my grandfather had visited our house before buying it. She described how they had chosen which fork to take (they chose the holly tunnel), and had stepped out into the flat, hazy expanse of heather, and had decided then and there that they would have the house. I hoped that my grandparents had found solace in this landscape as I had.

On the way home from the cemetery I walked past the moat, a small lake at the edge of the heath, where my father always showed me where my grandfather taught him to swim. I felt how the dot of common land on the map connected me to my family, and showed me how grief and growth were a part of life; they were a place where I was allowed to be sad. In that moment, though at the beginning of grief, all had seemed right with the world.

Over the next years, with my grandmother's little dog, my father, brother and I took many walks across the open, sandy tracks of the common. One winter we were snowed in for two weeks, and we walked each day among the fir trees sighing under the deep snow. As a work placement I volunteered for local work parties on the common, helping to repair the soggy planks of the boardwalk and scraping back turf for sand lizards and heath tiger beetles. I returned to Uganda many times, and saw the children there grow up as I had, playing in the dusty banana plants around their homes—the place that they loved.

At home I began to hear a distant threat, as jarring as the shriek of the chainsaws that I had heard that morning outside my grandparent's house. Our English borough had been tasked with building five hundred new homes each year until 2032; over 11,000 homes on what was supposed to be green-belt land. It was reported that over the course of the previous decade many politicians had bought acres of local, disused land at low cost, which they then began to sell to clamouring developers for a gross profit.

I visited Uganda for the last time, to find the banana plants eaten up by the city, the toilet block that we had built underneath a hotel, the school replaced with apartments, and the local people gone without trace. Back at home, despite local petitions, several fields that bordered the common were slowly eliminated from existence by houses that a struggling majority could not afford. I recognised a faint essence of the feelings I had seen in the eyes of residents in Kampala; their intense emotional and physical dependence on the small landscape where they had been raised and were raising their own families, which then became under threat from which they had no control.

Last summer, I walked on the common again with my father, brother and our families. My two daughters' squealed in delight as their tiny toes poked dents among the pine

twigs. We all took our shoes and socks off and stepped onto the cool sand, underlain by soft black grit. As we walked from the road onto the heath I wondered at the many states of red dust to gluey mud, oily as petrol, that I had seen that forked path; how many times I had felt elation in deciding which to take.

As we thudded along the boardwalk to the rush of the wind in the reeds, the caw of curlews out on the marsh, and the twitter of Dartford warblers, my eyes filled with tears at the unspeakable sadness that even this place is not safe from development; will the common still be here in fifty years, a hundred? My breath caught as I thought of the grief that I have sunk in these soft sands, in these black soils, of the seasons I have known and the healing I have had available to me just a short walk from my house. I wrestled with the illogicality that I seemed unable to care as much about a place that I do not know and love as much as this common, though it is all nature, all diverse, all irretrievable once gone. I have watched documentaries that show polar bears wobbling over melting ice, but I have never seen a film that shows the curlews when they cannot find habitat to nest, none of the Dartford warblers as they die, unable to find enough food.

I wondered who I would have become had I lived, as most do, in cities or with more restricted access to green space, and the thought follows of the national rise in anxiety, depression and mental health issues. I could not have understood a world where nature is not available for healing, for restoration, and as a space to share time with people; I could not envisage any other way to be alive. The common had been as a frame to those who lived in our house; a wider dwelling-space of permanence and of time-slowed. It had been a blank space that could become full with whatever we needed; with peace, or understanding, or hope. The common had shown me a world where interdependence, growth and death are precious rather than frightening.

That evening, my father sent me a recording of the nightjars trilling in the air above the pine trees, above the blooming August heather, and I took comfort from the thought that the common, for now, was still there.

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This piece by Claire Mascall is a personal story of the human-nature relationship, and intends to illuminate the deep connections between nature and human well-being. It is an account of a young woman for whom a local green space becomes a place to grapple with change, with relationships and with grief—showing how nature offers reflective places in which to find renewal, recovery and hope. Ultimately, this piece argues for a politics of preservation, restoration and hope for young people.





## **The Nature Of My Estate**

Liz Child

It's the sort of area you don't tend to arrive at with pleasure, and when it's the place you have to go to lay your head and pay your bills, it can be a hollow. Much less wild life here than anywhere else in town. Even the cemetery. And you feel the deficiency deeply if, to you, Nature is the measure of reality.

Should a camera-drone look down on a doughnut shaped town, this estate forms the hole in the middle. The buzzard's eye-view reveals a desert within, attested to by last year's Google satellite image. Circular is the road fringed with blocks of flats and stuffed with two terraces of old-folks sheltered bungalows. An encirclement striated with seared lawns sloping down towards the Tesco Express.

Losing Nature afflicts the nourishment of everyone's lives and livings. Where a sighting of a fox could be a joy, the darker thrill of moaning at the man who left the bulging rubbish bags out overnight suggests pack-dominance behaviour in an over-fed human population. Fox seeking sustenance finds scant nourishment, on the other hand. Delving swiftly, unseen, leaving contents to scatter into the four winds. Daisies, dandelions, hawkweeds and the food chain they supply, labour unfairly too. Should we tune into them, into our human ecology of here, we would catch what they have to say to us.

Planners of the 1960s, promulgating a 'new modern community', designed out

habitat for most living creatures, fashioning instead ubiquitous lawns, colourless buildings and a glut of young people with nowhere to shelter. Grown people laboriously haul shopping up the sloping, cracking footpaths, bewailing the Council, deploring their luck and their place. The conceit of Progress ejected much of what makes a human Human—the relationship with Nature.

The only creatures playing on the lawns in daytime are the contractors, mechanised humans from the Council playing tag with the trees, seeing how close they can strim to the trunks. Others jiggle in their lawnmower seats, skimming the lawns to the rhythms playing in their headphones. They are unacquainted with life-blood sap rising through the phloem just below the bark. They are unmindful of the predatory life form they become when in control of their machines. Bees and hoverflies would like to thrive on the daisies and hawkweed these humans mercilessly behead. Fortnightly I watch the seasonal rave of these beings, questionably being Human at all. If I had my own lawn I'd invite wildlife creatures or gardeners to play. Mechanized humans I would outlaw with policy.

There are a few pleasures of Nature here. Specimen trees grown tall and admired, as long as leaves don't drop or their branches don't lean. Of the mature ones: ten birch, one sycamore, one rowan, one field maple, one alder, two weeping willow, two younger flowering cherry—but one dying from a strimming wound—and a lilac bush thrusting itself out of the base of a wall. Of next generation saplings: zero birch, zero sycamore, zero rowan, zero alder, zero weeping willow, and zero flowering cherry. You get the picture? And for an impression, a red-oak exotic memorial tree to a past district councillor, lest we forget. Conversely, no flowerbeds or bushes to honour beetle, bird or butterfly. No mulched corner, pond or leaf-pile for them to call home.

By contrast, the body of the doughnut nourishes Nature. A life-belt. A sanctuary plump with back gardens, decorated with pollen plants, patterned with refuge hedgerows, sprinkled with fence-post lookouts and sheds to breed beneath. The fruitful wooded edge by the old church hall bristles with ostentatious brambles. These are wildlife's nearest residences. From here they come moseying into our overly lit night-time zone, finding a surplus of pies and squashed sandwiches dropped by teenagers on their way home from school. All are gone by morning. Wrappers left to roll along the grass or soar on gusts into the trees to be caught, flapping, ripping, toward their inevitable micro-plastic end.

Worms, full of wonder when long, fat and healthy, commonly slog across the tarmac wastes in search of moisture-filled gullies, but falter in the heat. The birds that would pick them off are few and far between thus giving time for lumbering pensioners, ex-allotmenters perhaps, and small children with primal understanding of a worm's value, to assist them to the drains. Survival is perilous when they leave the parched banks, in an April short on showers.

Speaking of dryness, the daffs are complaining. A poor display this spring after last summer's drought. Their small cry of "Spring is here" preceded a quickened gasp. The crocus bulbs I guerrilla planted along the foot-path bank emerged only to topple, as if unrequired to make useful nectar for any passing insect.

A pied-wagtail pair patrol across the short grasses, heads bobbing and tails pumping, investigating insect potential and finding little. Invariably, the crow family harry them, assuming protection of the hidden larders that they buried in stealth and deftly memorised. The pestering of the crow is fabled. Once wagtails are seen off, defensive of valuable territory they are storming up to disturb the buzzard gently soaring over our desert. From their roost in the tallest birch tree, the crow family dominate the bird-scape, but for the growing population of gulls.

The flats take the brunt of the impact. The apex of the roofs become white streaked cliffs, but remain un-nested peaks. Gull cries delude us that we live on the coast,

but it is only cars that come in waves rumbling like the sea in the night, whipping up tension like the froth caught on a beach, and occasionally leaving a hedgehog or cat's corpse tangled in a dusty tide line at the kerb.

The gulls and the crows rarely skirmish. Contention however, simmers just below the surface of the overgrown human population and their canine companions. A lack of everything also precludes a dog play park. Having in mind fiscal punishment, owners guiltily bag their dog's leavings. We monitor from our kitchen windows as we all know there aren't enough slugs, or rain for that matter, to deal with fouling chunks of faeces. And the crows don't have the guts for that sort of detritus.

Neither does the green woodpecker who sails in on odd occasions, displaying his magnificent plumage of black and white trim edging lime green wings. His arrival call, a three-note exhortation, "attention, it's me, it's me". Imperiously he hops about propping himself on speckled tail feathers trailing like a military tail-coat. He glares and flashes his red balaclava, watching for trouble. Our scattering of specimen trees is hardly a protective hideout but he has no need of one, for no one will mess with the stout sword he stabs at the ground with. His thrusts are too fast to see the forage he gleanes, but when winter arrives at the doughnut's edge and the snow is on the ground, he comes for fallen apples. A spirited muse against the bright white world for a day.

The robin trills the dawn chorus now that the blackbird has been silenced by the crow family. She trills alone, with no responses heard from distant trees. A blue tit attempts harmony later, but sounds unsure of himself. Their efforts seem to be keeping an age-old tradition alive in the hope that Nature will retrieve her place once humans recognise the loss. A re-enactment, lest they forget. We have already forgotten the cuckoo.

Absurdly, my CD of birdsong arrived today. Sent by the RSPB's campaign that aims to increase awareness of the plight of bird populations, by raising it high into the record charts. Hoping, justifiably, that human society will hang its head in shame, and accordingly adapt its behaviour.

The robin, while waiting for us to catch up, has done so and learnt the craft of bird-feeder hanging. It took some time flapping, stressing, assessing, testing sufficiency of support on the short metal perches for her chubby, pink-bibbed bulk. In their long history robins have followed pigs in the small-holdings, picking off grubs from the snuffling porcine excavations. When the pigs and the small-holdings went they adapted to follow gardeners as they dug their trenches, perching on spade handles waiting for a gardener to return from its tea-break, awaiting worms. Now comes the age of no-dig gardening, to which they must adapt yet again. Bird-feeder hanging must be a misery, but is a 'needs must' hereabouts and nowadays.

Still unsure of her prowess, she gives way to the goldfinch flock, the strutting chaffinches and the tag-along greenfinch, all with readily adapted stubby beaks that break and chew and drop seeds for the ground-feeding wren and dunnock. In time robin beaks or bulks could adapt to seed cracking and perching specialisms, but for now she hangs on in tentative harmony with blue or coal tit, confident in her larger presence despite her slighter skill.

From this catalogue one might think an abundance of bird life abides here, but not so. It is a last refuge. When a pair of tree sparrows turn up to feed they bring a fearful reminder, for if they are here then they are not there. Elsewhere is no longer hedge or woodland to hide from sparrow-hawks on their daily sortie, or from the contractor's netting. These brown-streaked beauties bring notice of diminished countryside out there beyond our doughnut. Once I sang with joy at their irregular visits, now the pain of their subsistence flies in with them, jabbing at my guilt. Few of us can afford to care, for persistent survival is also our *modus operandi*. The bird-feeders become the saviours of souls, both the sparrow's and ours.

Lichens, the remainers cleverly more resistant to air-pollution, *Lecanora conizaeioides* and dull yellow *Xanthoria parietina* sparsely colonise tree trunks or try their luck on concrete roof tiles. Resigned, they wait for the opportunity to revive the ecosystem, as their ancestors have done before them. A crew of plant-life builders, inclining their skills at moisturising, mineralizing, nitrogen-fixing, coexisting, waiting to be requisitioned once humans change their habits. More elaborate varieties are long sacrificed, their monitoring completed, job done, no retirement, just dusted to dust, by chemically-loaded winds of contamination.

The lawns dry out as they vaporize invisibly and temperature differentials become all wrong. Moisture accumulates in the skies overhead when it should be absorbed in the soils. It traps smoke from distant fires making grey days greyer and settles dirtily on our white plastic window sills. Swilling cloudbursts pour down, flushing soil to the gullies and kerbs, where sycamore seeds take the chance offered at a dogged attempt to grow. It doesn't take long to desiccate. As the moisture stays bonded in carbon-filled clouds the gentle daily dew is thwarted. Patches of bare soil allow deep-rooted, colonising hawkweeds their flower-head. Desperate insects act fast to draw nectar before the next weed beheading takes place.

South-facing banks enduring climate-changing sunshine crack open again, this time in April, not August. Mosses falling from concrete roof tiles make plenty of material for nesting, but no one wants to build nests with dried-up prickly moss. It lies on the ground for all the world resembling miniature hedgehogs curled and protective, reminding us of the absence of the real ones. Once correctly identified, dried moss is swept away and denied the opportunity to grow into soil.

Irony strikes when a quarterly posted through our letter boxes advertises the pleasures of seasonal visits to glorious gardens. Articles on spring plants we might find "making everything fresh and green and bursting with life". Life doesn't burst here, it wavers. Two autumns ago, a lone birch bolete appeared beneath the twin-stemmed silver birch. None since or before in the five years I've looked out on that spot.

Outmoded council policy requires permissions to plant a shrub, bans climbers from growing up walls and threatens our tenancies if we are found feeding pigeons. The designers, the overviews, and the attitudes of our council benefactors hide behind the times, behind the trends, blinded to bio-diversity loss and climate emergencies. Affecting a perplexing tenant-Council relationship based on benevolence to the subordinated. One that buttresses every council estate in this country, I venture, and one that underpins an even greater subordination, the shrinking of the wildlife-human relationship.

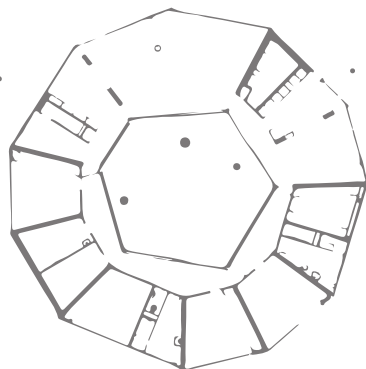
Community Acts allow a turn-around. We make our demands, as Community head-butts with the Council, and power shifts. The subordinated become united. Within a tenuous harmony exploration of working with Nature begins. The time for Community Gardens has arrived and, as funding flows, the entropy shall reverse as we compost and plant together. We will stand our ground like bears, and be photographed as if pandas, and it will become our haunt to retrieve and mend. Appropriate wildlife will revisit. We carefully do not use the term 'rewilding', although that will be what it is for the emergent ecological-mind.

Enticed by barbecues, gathering gradually into a band of naturalists and growers, gardening busy-bees, the old and the skill-less. We aim high looking to changing middens into Gardens of Eden. Slowly, conjecturing, we learn to change small corners with gentle impressions, adapting like the robin to build our skills and confidence. Tentatively trying out the powers attributed to a constituted community group, surprising ourselves with success. We spread the word in consultative conversations as if a bee waggle-dancing in the hive, saying: "One day it could look like this." "Other towns do it and so can we." "Of course, we shall look after the wildlife. We need them to come." "No, we do 'no-dig', you won't hurt your back."

Meanwhile, I watch the buds plumping up optimistically on the trees, while we plump up the hopeful dreams of resuming natural abundance. The ubiquitous lawns cascading down towards the Tesco Express one day may be apple orchards, and fields of fruit and new birch and more rowan and nesting birds and ponds with toads and flowers and insects, and food for all in all. Humans and wildlife alike may harvest as they forage new desire-lines, adapting deeply as they go. And the worms will remain safe in the banks and the flowerbeds.

The buzzard will monitor us while we courageously adapt. In hope, we will send the camera drone up to look down on our re-habited charm of thriving abundance. The more satisfying of doughnuts are full and diverse. So, I will watch for the day the buzzard settles in the tall birch trees by the foot path and the robin goes back to resting on spade handles. It will tell me that Nature's abundance wants to re-inhabit my estate.

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Liz Child is retired, and weary of the many years that she has watched Nature being disregarded and harmed, so she has taken to writing. Her early work life was in manual and care work until, in her 40s she studied human ecology, and now is an advocate for agroecology, permaculture and community gardening.





## **Bluebells**

Caroline Bateson

I am at one with nature—to the extent that I feel damaged when nature is destroyed, as if we were one body.

I grew up in a tiny, exposed hilltop hamlet called Halse, at the southern tip of Northamptonshire. I had a rustic childhood—living with my mum and younger sister on the edge of our hamlet. I bonded with nature as a child through constantly playing out in the countryside which surrounded us like an extended garden. I remember when I first noticed bluebells.

It was a typical weekend (May 1978) and I awoke with that lovely feeling of relief from the school routine a Saturday morning brought. My sister Lizzie and I sat lazily in our beds until the sunbeams and the warm blue sky compelled us to get up. After breakfast, we sped down on our bikes to our friend's farm; past the row of biscuit-coloured council houses, past the farm cottages on the corner and down the tree-lined lane to Halse Grange farm.

We opened the wrought iron gate into the front garden and heard the cows bellow and rattle the metal gates in the adjacent farm-yard. We tried to peer into the playroom as we passed the window, but in the bright sunshine couldn't see if our friends were inside. The mustard-yellow back door was open but we felt too shy to go straight in, so we rapped on the brassy fox-head knocker. No one heard us as we loitered, embarrassed.

Suddenly there was a bluster of dogs and footsteps, and the farmer, our friend's dad (we called him Uncle Donald), arrived through the back gate with his two black and white sheepdogs Carlo and Rex. The dogs ran up to us, tails wagging, while Uncle Donald rescued us from the doorstep.

'I don't know where those tinkets are by golly, all still in bed I shouldn't wonder,' he grumbled mildly. 'Sarah!' he bellowed into the house, 'where are you? Caro and Lizzie are here.'

'Hiya, we're down in the playroom,' I heard Sarah, (my friend and the eldest sister) call from down the long corridor. We went in reluctantly, not wanting to be inside on this beautiful morning.

We sat down on the squashy, golden armchairs in front of Swap Shop. The room was sunlit and an unnecessary log fire burnt in the new wood-burner. I felt suffocated by the warmth and morning TV and desperately wanted to go outside. I had almost resigned myself to being stuck indoors all morning, when Sarah, Jane and Wendy's mum bustled in (we called her Auntie Beti).

'Now darlins, I have to do the church flowers tomorrow, so I want you to go up to the copse and get some bluebells for the flower arrangements.'

'Ow mum, do we have to?' mumbled Jane, who was curled up on the floor in a square of sunshine, somnolent from warmth and inactivity. It was always a challenge to extricate her from cosy places.

'Yes, yes, the bluebells will be just right for picking now, go on with you.' Auntie Beti insisted. Beti came from a farm in mid-Wales and her Welsh-ness was evident in the lilt of her voice. I jumped up gratefully—it was such a relief to get outside.

We all scrambled over the first farm gate then had to stop and open it to let Carlo the elderly sheep dog through. Rex, the younger sheepdog had already slithered between the bars in the gate at top speed. We passed Halse water tower, ugly and sinister-looking. We passed the murky old pond we had skated on in winter-time.

We set off across the second field, delighting in the space and sunshine as we ran exuberantly up and down the wave-like undulations of the medieval ridge and furrow system. The dark green grass was bright with buttercups and the sun grew hot.

'This field is called the 'Dairy Ground,' informed Sarah, who knew all the old field names from going out shepherding with her dad. 'They used to keep the dairy cows up here because the ground was too wet and rough to grow wheat.' She added.

We crossed the last field towards Halse copse and found the barely discernible gateway between the trees. The wooden gate was wedged in among the long grass tussocks. We heaved the gate open and entered into a completely different world. The tangled greenery brushed our legs as we stood in the shade cast by the towering oaks and ashes, just coming into leaf. The air was cool and damp, with tangy freshness. We walked along the shady ride bordered by deep ditches.

'Where are the bluebells then?' Asked Jane.

'Down this ride and turn to the right, I remember seeing lots there when I came with dad,' replied Sarah. We all charged off to be the first to find them. I spotted a blue shimmer between the trees.

'Over there!' I called to Sarah. We raced across towards them, tripping on roots and dips and brambles. Soon we were all bending down picking.

'Make sure you pick them at the bottom of the stalk for the flower arrangements,' instructed Sarah.

'Be careful not to pull the roots up so they grow again next year,' I added as the sound of juicy popping stalks accompanied our busy picking.

'Eeycuk' said Wendy, 'my fingers are all sticky with bluebell juice.'

'Me too' replied Lizzie.

‘Hey look at these!’ Jane called, ‘I’ve found some pink ones and look, there’s a white one!’ We all ran across to her, trying not to trample the bluebells underfoot.

‘Wow, these are amazing!’ I said, admiring the delicate colours of the flowers’ bells. ‘Look these ones next to it are all different shades of mauve and pink!’

‘I don’t think we should pick these ones,’ said Sarah. We all agreed, they seemed sacred and special. We looked again and left them growing.

Soon we had armfuls of bluebells and we were starting to lose interest. We collected the flowers and set off back to the main path. I turned around to take a last look at the swathes of bluebells which bathed the trees’ feet in a mist-like shimmer. We struggled back through the wooden gate, leaving the woods to their own slow growing and ancient silence.

Back at the farm, we put the flowers on the kitchen table and set off home for lunch.

‘Wait, wait a minute, Caro and Lizzie,’ Sarah called after us. ‘Mum wants you to take some bunches for your mum and your house.’ Sarah handed us big bundles of bluebells, still bleeding juice from their stems. We plodded home, smelling the elusive fragrance as we went. We walked into our sunny kitchen to find gran had come over to visit. She was sitting in her usual armchair wearing her old purple coat and head scarf. We went over to hug her and give her a bunch of bluebells to sniff.

My gran provided the solid comfort of my childhood; with her big round knees, wide lap and soft arms. She was always at home and often looked after us, while our mum (an opera singer), travelled away to teach and sing.

Gran was born in 1908 in the nearby village of Woodford Halse (a place transformed by the coming of the Great Central Railway in Victorian times). She spent her entire life in Northamptonshire, only moving five miles to Thorpe Mandeville when she got married. She loved to tell us vivid stories about ‘the olden days’ in a way which made me wish I had lived in those times.

She brought her own country childhood to life, telling us of riding from village to village in the baker’s cart delivering bread, about hay-making and the fun she had with her three brothers and many cousins who lived in the villages scattered about the countryside. I felt deeply rooted by the generations of family that had farmed and lived in Northamptonshire for hundreds of years.

As children we went back to Halse copse to pick bluebells every May and each year my bond to the place deepened. I assumed it would always be there, the dappled light and the beautiful shimmery sheen of bluebells filling the woods. We took for granted our freedom to wander unrestricted and explore wherever we pleased.

As I grew older, playing out was replaced by walking. I found home and school life difficult and the countryside became a place of solace. I had special places that I walked to time and time again, in all seasons. These places made me feel rooted in the earth. I always needed to come back and see them, even after I had left home. I still need these places now.

My home countryside around Halse remained the same, while nearby the M40 cut a huge swathe through the Cherwell Valley. However, it wasn’t until the beautiful duck-pond we used to play in adjacent gran’s garden was bulldozed for a big, new house that I witnessed the direct impact of capitalism on a place I loved.

The loss of the duck-pond upset gran deeply and she was diagnosed with cancer just as the building work began. She particularly mourned for the swallows which would return for the summer, expecting to dip and feed on insects over the duck-pond, but instead found a red-brick house there.

After battling for many years, gran finally died, just at the beginning of May, when all the birds, blossoms and flowers were bursting into their full delight. She was buried next to grandad in Thorpe Mandeville churchyard, overlooking the gentle fields and hedges which rolled like green dumplings towards the village she had originated from.

When I came back for the funeral, I went to stay in my childhood home in Halse. I needed the comfort of the fields and familiar places I had known so intimately. I awoke at dawn the morning of the funeral with a stony feeling of loss inside me.

I could see a cold pink dawn through a gap in the curtains so I drank tea, dressed and went out, knowing just where I needed to go. It was so early that everyone else was asleep. Outside, the lark song was already in full cacophony over the growth of green new wheat as I strode out towards Halse copse. I walked and walked, to try and walk away the pain of loss. I walked across the wet grass of the familiar sheep field and climbed the high gate in the corner.

I walked close to the hedge to keep away from the cows. The buttercups were sleeping and wet with dew. The hedges were partly bare, partly green and an icy wind blew, making me cold inside and out, despite the rising sun. I thought of Uncle Donald who always used to say;

‘Ne’r shed a clout, till May is out.’

The cows stared at me in surprise with their breath hot and steaming as I walked past, through cold air and sunshine. It was peaceful, with the sound of a cuckoo blowing in on the breeze. Halse copse was getting closer, enticing me. I walked across the Dairy Ground, sparkling with golden buttercups, now waking in the warming sunshine. My heart felt just a bit less ice-ridden, eased by the motion of walking through this landscape which embraced me with such deep familiarity.

The sunny, sheltered edge of the copse was bright green with hawthorn leaves, known locally as ‘bread and cheese.’ I ate some, relishing the green taste, and went into the woods.

There I found bluebells, my heart’s desire. Lakes of them—still and shimmering, just how I remembered them. I revisited all the places I knew from childhood and found the special pink, mauve and white bluebells we got so excited about. They were wet, cold and icy with the night’s dew. Their fat, juicy stems popped and dribbled when I accidentally trod on some and broke them. I wandered about, imbibing their colour and fragrance. Shafts of sunlight came in through the mostly-bare trees before the canopy closed and there would be no more light for flowers like this.

I meandered from place to place, drawn to the intense patches of blue-purple and absorbed the pungent hyacinth scent which pervaded the air. I savoured every moment among the ephemeral ancient woodland flowers. I felt so comforted by their presence and the knowledge that it was just the same as when we came as children. After hours of undisturbed immersion among the bluebells, I felt peaceful. My sadness and grief were soothed just by being there.

Finally I stood with my back against a tree, warm in a shaft of sunshine and gazed one last time. I knew that I loved this place and that it was precious. It reassured me to know it would always be here to come back to, even though people I loved would die. I thanked this place and its reliable feeling of permanence and walked home.

It is now 2020 and capitalism in the form of HS2 is set to smash through this land. This corner of Halse copse, where we entered the woods by the little wooden gate, will be sliced by HS2. The buttercup-filled Dairy Ground will be underneath shiny rail-tracks and fast moving trains. We will no longer be able to cross the fields to reach what remains of the woods.

HS2 will also cross through the bottom of the valley in Lower Thorpe, just below Thorpe Mandeville church where gran and grandad are buried. This view will be urbanised and you will hear the sound of high-speed trains passing every three minutes.

If you look at Northamptonshire on a road map, the county already looks shackled and chained by roads. The largest remaining unspoilt area between the M1 and the M40 will be severed through the middle by HS2.

The noise and scale of the construction process doesn't bear contemplating. The special pink, mauve and white bluebells will be crushed and buried. This ancient woodland site will be bulldozed. The hedges Uncle Donald carefully laid; weaving the tops in the old Northamptonshire tradition will be demolished. The up and down pastures we raced across, the remnants of the old medieval three-field system, will be obliterated.

The loss of precious places like these cannot be mitigated and the capitalism that HS2 embodies is like a destructive cancerous growth.

Shortly after the plans for HS2 were announced, I was diagnosed with a rare cancer. I am an environmental indicator and my body became the scene of an environmental disaster. My cancer treatment involved major surgery and chemotherapy. Before surgery my body was soft and beautiful like the Northamptonshire countryside. Now it has a damaged landscape. Along the entire length of my abdomen is a long red scar—straight and ruthless like HS2. The countryside and I are casualties of capitalism.

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Caroline Bateson is in all ways passionate about wildlife and the countryside. Experiencing nature closely inspires wonder in her and the more she learns about the intricacies of the natural world the more awed she feels. It concerns her deeply that we are destroying the earth in so many ways and ultimately ourselves. Nature and landscapes inspire her writing and she writes in an attempt to share the wonder and stop the loss.





## **Walking Through Trauma**

Sophie Lawson

Cool mud squelches between my small, naked toes. I close the rickety wooden gate on the maelstrom labelled home and wander away, down the road to the place where the poplars meet. I have an appointment with an old friend. She stands alone in a clearing, daisies and clover dancing at her feet. For hours I lie there, taking in all she has to teach: sensing her stillness, listening to her silence. Every year she sheds all that is rotten to make way for the green fire that bursts forth from her fingertips. A magic-show reminder that everything is ephemeral: it won't last. She is teaching me to tap into my own rivers of sap, oozing with peace. Here, supported by her steady roots, I can let my 11-year-old imagination run wild, and I am free.

Fast forward 14 years. I have recently been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I drag the savage beast of my past out from the depths to which it was banished, and it hijacks my life with the dangerous abandon of a suicide bomber. As the storm rages, I lose connection with the people in my life, but this sacred memory of the wise old oak remains intact. Through the wreckage, she calls. She stirs within me what George Monbiot calls the ghost psyche of our wild ancestors, that 'seam of intense emotion, buried so deeply in our minds that we seldom find it'. As my life unravels that seam widens into a gaping chasm through which the call of the wild echoes. Booms.

Being stuck in trauma is like being stranded on a mountain in a white-out. Imagine: your brow is furrowed into painfully narrow tunnel vision and you can't see more than a few feet in front of your face. There is a path, but you cannot see it. The icy hailstones of the past pummel you with a painful vigour that blinds you to all that is present. Your body is curled inwards, braced against the gale. Is your heart punching through your ribcage or is the very earth beneath your feet quaking? Every muscle fibre is tensed, ready, vigilant, but you are unable to move solid, stuck. Chokehold. Suddenly, you have gained 10,000 feet. The air is too thin and it's getting harder to breathe.

Panic happens when feelings are compressed into a space too small to contain them. When your life is squeezed in between office blocks, back-to-back diary appointments and self-limiting ideals of how you 'should' behave, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. The modern urbanite faces a constant deluge of stress hormones and it can be hard to find enough outlets to stem the tide. Stepping into nature is like releasing the pressure valve. The waters of Loch Lomond can easily accommodate my tears. The Torridonian sandstone can easily absorb the force of my angry, stomping feet. In nature, there is no such thing as 'too much'. Your feelings will never be exiled here. The container is vast; there is ample room to breathe.

I can no longer ignore it. I crave the vast silence of Rannoch Moor, the jagged volcanic skyline of Glen Coe, the soft lapping of sand on sea. Many people tell me that I shouldn't go anywhere in this 'fragile' and 'vulnerable' condition, but I am more afraid that I will atrophy into these confining labels I've been dressed in. I have one of those sturdy types of jobs that people carry around with them like a bag for life, reliably transporting food to the table—why on earth would I quit? All I know is that safety is essential for any healing to take place, and solitude is the safest place I know. Nature has always been my sanctuary and I need to reconnect with my oak's sturdy roots. People think I am running away, but the opposite is true: I am running towards life, towards safety and towards healing. I hand in my notice, pack my bags and say goodbye to my home in Glasgow. I set off on foot, following my compass dial North, into the UK's last remaining wilderness.

It takes me a while to settle into a rhythm. Usually, endurance adventures are about pushing your body to its physical limits, but that's not what I came here to do. I came here to heal. A conversation begins: the soft animal of my body speaks in whispers, barely audible at first as if she doesn't believe she is worthy of being heard. I listen, delicate and unwavering. She begins to speak louder, more forcibly, until I can anticipate her needs before they've even solidified into words. I don't want to spend this trip lost in worries and day-dreams—that, I could do from my desk. I want to be acutely aware, inseparably immersed in all the delights and disgusts nature has to offer. This quality of attentiveness is exactly what's encouraged in the pamphlet handed out by GPs in Shetland, where you can now get nature on prescription. Take off your socks and feel bare earth on bare soles. Inhale the scent of damp leaves and musky soil. Get a sense of how everything is precarious, dying, precious.

When you are stuck in spirals of grief, nature cuts off negative thought patterns at the root. I take refuge by a stream that gently trickles down the jagged hillside. Rolling out my sleeping bag in the open air, I let my small body merge with the moss and heather. I let the small insects nestle into me—I am home for the night. For hours I watch as twilight gently extinguishes my self-centred problems and the starlight shines on the explosive tranquillity of the universe. What is my pain but a speck of stardust? Stretch trauma into aeons and it shrinks into oblivion. Let the dew crystallise all around as you and wake with a mind filled with that kind of clarity.

In my becoming smaller I am filled once again with all the awe and wonder of my 11-year-old self. Awe is not just found in boundless night skies or the magnificence of mountain vistas, but also in the tiny world found in a buttercup, or in the delicate petals of the daisy—did you know each petal is actually a flower, whole in and of itself? Did you know that trees in the forest feed each other when they're sick through a vast underground labyrinth of roots and fungus? Can you imagine the world of a bat? What it would be like to see through sound? Your eyes can see more shades of green than any other colour; we are evolutionarily designed for the wonders to be found amongst the grass and the trees, not to a life squeezed between slabs of concrete.

Trauma can tear apart your capacity for connection. How can you build trust on the shaky foundations of your earliest relationships? I search for this belonging in bottomless newsfeeds, inboxes and bottles of wine, but nature takes me back to the root. As I become absorbed in the forest I begin to unravel, like the unfurling fronds of the

dew-dappled ferns.

My self-serving preoccupations slide away and I enter into new relationships with the world; the trees take up new textures, the swallows swoop in psychedelic exuberance and we are all held in a vast, invisible, intricate web. My walk is a weaving of myself back into the fabric of a greater reality. I find a new foundation, a stability that allows me to tentatively step into the crippling insecurity of love once again. As John Muir put it “loved friends and neighbours, as love for everything increased, would seem all the nearer, however many the miles and mountains between us”.

One night I am camping at the top of Scotland’s largest waterfall. On the hill above mountain goats herd their young, beetles roll balls out of their dung, and a stag drinks from the same stream I drink. I see how we all flow from the same source. The whole valley is vibrant with the fullness of being alive and I am overflowing with it, like the pool that gives way to the waterfall beneath me. How can it be this beautiful? Every rock, every tuft of cotton grass, every squelch of my foot in the beds of moss. And here’s the thing: I am this. How could I ever hold such loathing for nature’s child? I am not a problem to be fixed, for I am life itself. As I soak in the pool on the edge of the precipice, I am reminded that there is beauty to be found in the falling apart. I float back and let all this toxic shame drain out of me.

Above all else, trauma takes away your sense of agency. It squashes your window of tolerance into an infinitesimal dot, like a small insect underfoot. You live in perpetual fear that a mental hijack can happen at any time or any place. You are not in control. Walking through harsh and unrelenting landscapes—the blisters, stinging nettles, the soft body against hard earth—brings you into direct and constant communion with the resident terrorist. A negotiation starts. The beach: a battleground where territory constantly ebbs and flows. Restoring a sense of control is paramount in the recovery process, and yet you cannot control this relentless roar of water. You must learn to dance with the tides. In the face of unrelenting change, mastery of the wild is gained only through the art of surrender.

My journey was more like a tangent than a direct line; I tended towards my goal in the hope of never actually reaching it. The further north I went, the slower I progressed. I would set up camp and lay down all that was weighing me down. I would explore the rivers and coves, barefoot. To every patch of earth, baring my sole. I collected things that signified my myriad feelings: a fire-red rock; something unidentifiable, mangled and torn; a pure white tuft of fluffy cotton grass. I carried them to an isolated little lochan cradled in the hillside and threw them, one by one, into the peat-black water. Bit by bit, I gave my pain back to the earth. Finally—stripped of all my clothes, my grief, of everything—I threw myself. All-in. From this amniotic bathing, I was born again.

I round yet another mound of monotonous moorland, and suddenly I have stumbled upon it. I am here. The tall white lighthouse that marks the end of the earth—or at least the end of my world as I know it. There is nowhere left to go. Standing between me and the North Pole is nothing but vast, open ocean. The powerful waves smash and crush against ancient cliffs and I stretch myself out along the gnarled and fractured Lewisian Gneiss. I am exposed; I have nothing left to hide. These rocks have survived 2.8 billion years of fiery transformation and in comparison, this burden of my past is light. I have carried it for twenty years, across 350 miles of Scottish wilderness. At Cape Wrath, the turning point, I finally lay it down.

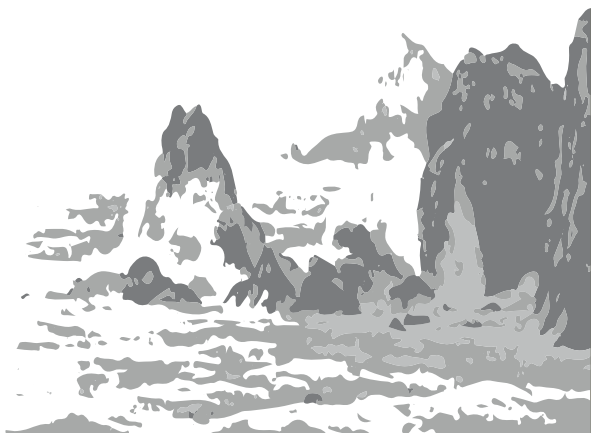
Like the Viking ships that change their course West, I too am bound for change. I am no longer the helpless sapling peering up through the branches of a wise old oak; I have established my own roots. I am a bubbling spring, ready to charge my own course. When I return from the wild, I throw my anxiety medication in the bin. It will be a long time before the unravelling strands of my life begin to weave together again, but the process has begun. I have never felt stronger than I did carrying everything I needed to live for two months across moors and mountains under no other volition than my own. If the wild has taught me anything it is this: how to claim my primal power back.

Nowhere in my conservation lecture halls did I hear the utterance of mental health. None of my lecturers told me how one day I would need the wilderness to survive a terror attack. The multitude of ways in which nature bathes us, feeds us and clothes us? Yes. The wonder-drug potential lying undiscovered in the Amazon? Yes. Humanity's dwindling sense of stewardship? Of course, we covered all of this. But the deep psychological connection between our species and the natural world? Of how nature provides a soothing balm for all kinds of mental distress: from anxiety to insomnia to ADHD? Not a sniff. At a time when depression is the leading cause of disability and the promise of Prozac is perishing behind its placebo facade, we need nature's knowledge more than ever. It's no longer enough to save nature from humans, we need to save it for humans.

Our wild places are diminishing fast. I am an irrational being—only pretending to make data-based decisions. Statistics about ecosystem services are not enough to shift my irrational heart. It is to this emotional being that conservation must appeal. The more I am healed by the earth's restoring gifts, the less I can stare with indifference into the anthropogenic depths of her wounds. This is not something that can be achieved in an afternoon stroll; for time and toil are part and parcel of the pilgrim's path. As Jon Krakauer observes, "an extended stay in the wilderness inevitably... develop[s] a strong emotional bond with the land and all it holds." This connection provides great cause for conservation. Would I tie myself to a tree out of an abstract idea of moral sensibility? No. Would I tie myself to the wise old oak, who in so many ways has taught me about the very nature of survival? Absolutely.

Now, with a sense of urgency, go. Let your pain flow out through the veins of The Wild.

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Sophie Lawson left her civil service job in 2018 to live life more fully. Inspired by her walk across Scotland, she is now writing up her masters dissertation from a tent in the highlands on the mental health benefits of spending time alone in the wilderness.



## A fascination with seals

Jacqueline Hitt

A battalion of orange and white traffic cones meets me as I drive along the narrow roads leading to Donna Nook Nature Reserve on the Lincolnshire coast. Placed there to prevent parking on the roadside verges, it's the sort of welcome you would expect at a popular music festival or a major sporting event rather than a stretch of windswept fenland in mid-November. The long line of dark green 'portaloo's and army of high-vis-wearing security personnel are too. It's a hint of what lies ahead.

Like hundreds of other people on this calm, overcast day, I've come here to witness a remarkable natural spectacle—the thousands of grey seals that gather here during autumn and early winter to give birth and mate. For most visitors, the chance to see dark-eyed, white-coated seal pups is the big draw. On Saturdays and Sundays at the height of the breeding season, 7,000 people will wander along this shoreline to see the seals. By the end of its six-or-eight-week period, 70,000 or so people will have made the trip.

A similar scene plays out at the other accessible seal breeding locations up and down the British coast from early September to late December. It's an exciting time for the wildlife and conservation teams managing these sites, but also a demanding one. They have a challenging task: protecting thousands of vulnerable seals from an even larger number of onlookers—and vice versa. It also presents an opportunity to turn our fascination with these inquisitive creatures into a force for good.

You hear the grey seals before you see them. From a distance, their calls sound almost mournful. A soft, haunting moan that rolls up from the beach and over the gently sloping sand dunes. As you get closer, it's the 'maa' bleats of the pups that captivates. Through a gap in the sea-buckthorn, a sandy path winds down to the beach's edge. It's here that I get my first glimpse of seal breeding in full swing.

"It's amazing!" observes the woman in a navy blue Berghaus jacket standing next to me. In front of us, on the other side of a protective wooden and metal double-fence are scattered the cigar-shaped bodies of hundreds of grey seals. Most lie prone on muddy banks, stretches of flattened saltmarsh grass or camel-coloured wet sand. There are large, fractious bulls desperate to mate. Tobacco-brown cows dozing within calling distance of their calves. A mix of wails, barks and bellows fill the air. It's not what could be described as singing, but there is a choral quality: once one starts, others join in.



I tell the woman that I hadn't expected them to be this close. A young seal calf, no more than a day or so old, is resting against the fence less than a metre away. Covered in a silky coat of white down, there is a smattering of silver-grey around its muzzle and in between the folds of its furred hind-flippers. It gazes at me through immense, round eyes. I'm entranced.

"What a wonderful sight!" I overhear an onlooker remark. "A little miracle shining light into the world." We chat, and she explains that she's been coming to Donna Nook for over 10 years: on a spiritual quest of sorts. We agree how rare it is to witness such moments in a wild animal's life. A man comments that coming here fills him awe. He's not alone. All along the 600-metre long fence, people have gathered. Most stand respectfully, transfixed by the unfolding scene. A group of clipboard-wielding primary school children point in excitement and argue about the answers to a quiz. Mothers grab tiny toddler hands to stop them reaching out through the fence. Then the sharp, shrill ring of someone's mobile phone breaks the spell. Passers-by turn their heads, tut and glare.

The sheer numbers of both seals and humans visiting Donna Nook at this time of year means that Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust has had to put in place a robust management plan. This includes recruiting a group of volunteer seal wardens. Easily recognisable from their red jacket and neon-yellow vest with 'seal warden' emblazoned across the back, their job is twofold: to patrol the site and educate visitors.

Adrian is one such warden. As a former policeman he has had plenty of crowd control experience. He tells me that if I came back tomorrow, there would be thousands rather than hundreds of people here. These are the sorts of numbers that he was used to seeing at local league football matches or busy shopping centres, not huddled along an exposed stretch of mudflats. A big part of Adrian's role is reminding people to follow the site's visitor code that reinforces the need to keep your distance, avoid making loud noise and that it's inappropriate—as well as dangerous—to touch or feed the seals. "Thankfully, the visitors we get here are well behaved," he assures me. "They seem rather astounded by it all."

One of Adrian's colleagues, Andy, is a former deep-sea fisherman who has been on 'seal watch' for over 40 years. He sees it as a way of giving something back to the sea. We chat about how disconnected many people have become from the natural world and how limited visitor understanding of seals is despite them being of so much fascination. Some see coming here as a free day trip or just somewhere to stretch their legs before heading off for a warm pub lunch. A few even have to be reminded that these are wild animals, not here to put on a show'.

Continuing to watch the seals, I realise how much more we need to do to help people understand that with access rights come responsibilities. The stream of visitors is constant. While many get great pleasure from being here, there are traces of voyeurism; hints of exploitation too. When I ask reserve manager, Matthew Bisset, about the impact of this number of visitors, it's obvious that he shares my sense of unease. It's why the Trust is making a determined effort to engender a healthy respect for both the wildlife here and its human neighbours.

The seals look remarkably docile from behind the safety of the fence. If, however, I was to find myself on the other side, this would quickly change. Even minor disturbances can have dire consequences. Grey seal mothers and their calves have a short relationship at the best of times: seal pups only have between 16 to 18 days of their mother's milk before being weaned. Any disruption to that process puts the calf's life at risk. If a human or dog enters their territory, cows may stand their ground and fight back or be chased away. When the former happens dogs or their owners can get hurt. If the latter, pups can be abandoned and starve to death.

There are other quandaries too. Parking and crowd control both impact on the residents of nearby villages—it's one of the reasons why so many traffic cones are deployed along the roadsides. For a fee, a local farmer allows people to park in his fields just behind the dunes

to help improve the situation. The Trust also has a policy of not promoting Donna Nook. They turn down TV production team requests and ask for any photographs of the seals not to be attributed to the reserve. Images and content on social media spread like wildfire. Just one image of an “adorable” seal pup can dramatically boost visitor numbers. For some, it seems visiting the seals is like other aspects of life; driven by the fear of missing out.

At Horsey Gap on the East Anglian coast, the challenges are similar. When I visit in late December, visitor numbers are overwhelming. It’s the festive season and there are lots of people keen to burn off the excess calories they’ve consumed by enjoying a bracing family walk. A long snake of people is heading along the track towards Horsey Warren dunes. At one of several dedicated viewing platforms, a large crowd is forming. From a distance, it looks like a barricade. Up close, it becomes obvious that it’s a human wall. People of all ages and sizes are squashed together looking out over the beach at the last of this season’s seal pups.

Another small army of 250 volunteer seal wardens, this time members of the Friends of Horsey Seals, patrols here. Their task is more onerous than for the Donna Nook team because the coastline here is far longer—the wide expanse of flat beach between Waxham and Wiverton-on-Sea runs for six miles at least—and more accessible. The popular Norfolk Coastal Trail also follows the base of the tall dunes. While it’s possible to rope off sections during breeding season, this isn’t as effective as a fence because humans, dogs and seals are adept at ducking beneath blue and white rope.

Recently, the team have had to deal with new type of problem: rescuing ‘frisbee seals’. The coloured, hoop-like toys are left on the beach during the summer months. When one floats out to sea, it can get caught around the base of a young seal’s neck. As the animal grows, the disc gets stuck. If it’s not removed then it can cut into its flesh, the situation worsening the bigger it gets and eventually causing feeding problems. It’s a horrible predicament. A reminder too of the serious consequences of our lifestyles on other species.

Another problem is the growing visitor obsession with taking selfies. When wardens first began patrolling here 13 years ago, selfies didn’t exist. It seems people will do daft things, even put themselves in danger of a toxic seal bite, to capture the coveted Instagram image they seek. It begs the question of who is easier to manage: seals, or people? Watching a young woman lean over a newly weaned seal pup intent on getting the perfect shot, the answer becomes clear. Recently moulted, the pup is the definition of cute with a new sleek, mottled blue and grey coat. The woman is sat no more than a metre away from it, much less than the double-decker bus length that people are advised to stay. It’s only when a warden intervenes—reminds onlookers that these are wild animals with a nasty, infectious bite—that the crowd disperses and the seal slips away.

At Donna Nook they’ve also had problems with photographers—with as many as 200 of them walking out onto the mudflats—and have had to take determined action to address it. Here, it’s not the odd selfie that’s the issue: it’s those motivated by the fee they might get for a particularly striking shot. Dressed in neoprene wetsuits beneath camouflage jackets and wearing elbow and knee pads, these photographers are easy to spot, their apparel apparently making it easier to ‘sneak up on a seal’. I find it hard to comprehend why one photo, however brilliant it may be, could ever be worth the death of a seal pup.

Matthew explains that he and his team have gone to great lengths to stop them: including mounting ‘dawn patrols’ to intercept and remind them of the threat their actions represent. He shares this with tears welling in eyes revealing just how much energy and perseverance are sometimes needed to keep grey seal colonies like this safe. After several years of working with photography trade associations and groups to raise awareness and understanding of the impact such activity can have, the team’s hard work has paid off. Peer pressure also played a powerful role: photographers’ egos took a beating when other visitors loudly booed them for putting the seal pups at risk. As a result, few, if any, now dare to venture out onto the outer shore, and the seal colony has benefited: pup mortality rates

have dropped from a high of 35 percent in 2008 to just above 10 percent now. While it's still higher than the four to five percent of those giving birth closer in, it's a much more natural rate. Only half of seal pups make it through their first winter, so each one that survives its first weeks helps increase their numbers.

I'd gone to visit both Donna Nook and Horsey to learn more about grey seals. Instead it taught me more about humans and our attitudes to the natural world than it did about these remarkable creatures themselves. It was heartening to see so many people, of all ages and walks of life, taking an interest in seals. Similarly, the way hundreds of others volunteer their spare time to protect them, even in the very worst of weathers, is inspiring. It shows how acknowledging the bonds between ourselves and other species can stir our emotions and awaken protective instincts. It can even encourage those less engaged to act too—from reducing their use of plastic to becoming members of local wildlife groups.

In other parts of the country, through projects like the Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust and Zoological Society of London's citizen science surveys of seals, more people are getting involved in understanding and protecting both common and grey seals. Campaigns highlighting their plight and need for continued protection help. Rising concerns about plastic pollution— and the damage it can do to wildlife—plays a role too.

One factor in the seals' favour will always be their human-yet-not-quite-human qualities. In many ways their lives are a mirror of our own. We stare into their eyes and we see or sense something shared. This has enabled us to tell compelling and sometimes tragic stories of their plight and connect with them. It was a rush of compassion such as this that ushered in a new era of protection in 1914. Grey seal numbers were then in such peril that they became the first mammal in the world to be protected by law.

For now, grey seals are doing well all around the British coast. Over 2,000 pups were born at both Donna Nook and Horsey Gap during the 2019 season—thousands more at other locations too. The current UK population is estimated to be 130,000-150,000 or more, showing just what can be achieved when we assert the rights of other species to not just survive but thrive. It's a reminder, too, that losing more and more wildlife—our plants, insects, birds and mammals— isn't a fait accompli. It does, however, take concerted focus and action to improve their situation.

Our willingness to protect grey seals means their numbers are bouncing back. This can, and should, inspire us to do the same for the many other species and habitats that we are losing day by day, right now.

...

Jacqueline Hitt has a passion for all things wild and wonder-filled. She lives in Oxfordshire and has devoted her career to helping make workplaces safer, healthier and more sustainable. Writing enables her to engage deeply with the natural world and make sense of humanity's often paradoxical relationship with it. She has a soft spot for seals, islands and cowrie shells.





## Talking with Sunand

Frances Voelcker

Walking in the Wyllt at Portmeirion  
in the Japanese garden  
we discussed alien species.  
I explained to a Londoner  
the threat of Ponticum.  
He, of Indian descent,  
heard only racist attitude.

Down by the castle in Criccieth  
above the pebbles of West Beach  
on the margin of rock  
the exotic Village in Bloom  
screens the Knotweed tide.

A frenzy of buzzing below the humming ivy.  
A wasp clasps a honey bee  
in an ecstasy of rape,  
folds its thorax and jaws forward  
in its lust to devour the nectar,  
prevails in a terrible grooming.

It leaves. The bee is not dead: one leg moves.  
Another wasp arrives, eats its head,  
bites it in half, flies off with its guts.  
The hollowed case is glossy,  
black and tan above, fawn fur beneath.  
The ivy hums.

Purple blooms flare in swathes  
across the hillside, crowd under trees to glow,  
each head spits out a million sparks  
to set fresh fire. But fire itself  
cannot exhaust the poison from the wood.  
The search is on for Ponticum Varroa,  
not just a single predatory wasp.

And I am puzzling out our human fate.  
I think we need to cultivate like bees—  
accept the limitations of the hive,  
restrict our movement to the blossom zone,  
work so our presence benefits the flowers.

I know that there are many sorts of bees,  
some of which prefer to live alone.  
(I recognise necessity of wasps  
—but hope that something larger keeps them down.)

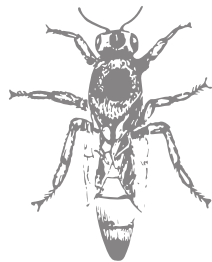
Sunand took the longest view of all  
“No need to intervene.” He was serene.  
“We’re just another agent bringing change.  
It’s always happened and it always will.  
The world will sort us out.”  
“Yes, so I fear.”

...

*Notes:*

*Ponticum is a variety of Rhododendron first imported to the British Isles in late 17C that has become invasive particularly in areas with acid soil and high rainfall, as no native species exists that can eat it to check its spread. It protects itself with a persistent poison, re-sprouts from the stump when cut down, and shades out most other vegetation preventing regeneration of native flora. Its pollen is deadly to the European Honey bee.*

*Varroa is a mite that uses honeybees as host. It severely weakens the bees, so that they succumb to several viruses.*



Frances Voelcker is a retired architect, an active Quaker, wife and grandmother. She has been a ‘Green’ since the mid-1970s. She wrote this poem several years ago when she was fearful of the future we were bringing upon ourselves and our children. She has since learned about the EcoFootprint, and realises that it is our current overblown notions of prosperity that propel us to catastrophe. We can prosper only when Gaia prospers.





## Ignorance and Bliss

Orlaith Delargy

I used to think I was pretty outdoorsy. I like hiking. I swim in the sea. I work for an environmental charity. But these phony credentials can carry me no further. My secret eco-shame is that *I don't know very much about nature*. I've lived in Glasgow, Dublin, Paris and London, but never in the countryside. Worthy tomes by Robert Macfarlane and John Muir stare out at me from every book shop—books that I know I should, but never will, read. Friends and colleagues compare notes on the best pen knives and bivvy bags while I stare into the distance, a single tear rolling down my cheek, and admit that I've never been camping outside of a festival.

In Dublin, where I grew up, you could get away with such admissions. As soon as you inched the nose of your bike outside the front door, you were heralded as a young Dervla Murphy. In school, we were periodically tested on our knowledge of the natural world, with less than impressive results. Our geography teacher made us gather three 'points of geographical interest' over each summer break and present them to the class on the first day back. Cue the chaotic scenes on the first of September as people raked over their holiday memories for some natural factoids ("is Thorpe Park geographically interesting?!").

Later educational encounters with the natural world were not much better. Studying modern European history at university, I learned about the Enlightenment, the establishment of Royal Societies and botanic gardens across Europe and the quest to classify and, ultimately, conquer nature. We read about wealthy male botanist after wealthy male botanist but I found I couldn't give two Fuchs what these Buffons had done. The relentless pursuit of classification, to put everything in its proper box, seemed to me just another example of man's foolish attempt to tame, and ultimately dominate nature.

Between the man-made climate crisis and the queues to reach the summit of Everest, it seems that little has changed. Our relationship with nature has been described as a tragic love story—and in this relationship, we are hapless at best and abusive at worst. Almost every time we interact with nature, we deplete it. We stomp over peat bogs and sand dunes, raid beaches for the prettiest shells, and storm through spiders' webs. We don hi-tech gear to brave the mountains, and when we get home, refreshed and ruddy-faced, we wash the kit and flush microplastic fibres into the babbling brooks o'er which we so

gaily leapt. On Winchelsea beach last week, I turned over a stone to find a saccharine message scrawled by a little girl in pink marker—"Dreams are like stars, you may never touch them, but if you follow them, they will lead you to where you need to go." Well, Bethan, the leachate from that permanent marker has probably destroyed the local marine ecosystem—how's that for a dream? And you don't know whether to laugh or cry when you read about three men charged with stealing wild succulents from public lands in California. They attempted to smuggle them into Asia, where the highly Instagrammable and uber trendy houseplants can sell for \$50 each.

But in a way, these stories calm my nerves—I can see that I am not alone in my profound ignorance of the natural world. In London, I thought I could hide my shame by choosing a home in a deeply urban, sometimes ugly estate in East London, where the only babbling brooks are of bin fluid and stale beer. The wind regularly whips up little vortexes of plastic bags, weed smoke and cigarette butts and blows them across the grey plains of Tower Hamlets. All the flats in my corner of the estate overlook a shared green with a big sycamore tree and an allotment. The green is used mostly as a snoozing spot for cats and, more recently, a bonfire site for a man to burn some (incriminating?) papers and the plastic bags in which they had been kept.

An unlikely place, you might think, for communion with nature. Enter my housemates, who have sprung and coaxed every possible ounce of growth out of the area. In huge planters on our front porch, potatoes, purple sprouting broccoli, chard, spinach, rocket, tomatoes and broad beans are growing. The sheer weight of plant knowledge in the house has led me to naively invest in some for my own windowsill: lavender, silver bush and hebe. I've killed two out of three.

The area is starting to bloom now that it's summer, and the front porch is becoming a hive of local activity. An old man passes every morning to get his copy of *The Sun* in the corner shop. On his way back, he stops to inspect the plants and peer through the big kitchen window to see if anyone's in. We are and we smile and wave. He never smiles back.

By contrast, the Bangladeshi woman two doors down spends her afternoons gazing lovingly at the growth. If the door is open, she'll wander in to give us unsolicited gardening advice. The conversation is faltering as she speaks little English, but we take "very good" and "very nice" as confirmation that we are on the right track. She and the other Bangladeshi women in the estate run the allotment in the green, and our porch-plants paved the way for them sharing their *iftar* with us during Ramadan.

Left to my own devices, I feel I never would have made these neighbourhood or natural connections. As a lifelong urbanite, my default setting is head down, earphones in and focus on myself. This individualism can make learning about the natural world a chore. Tackling the canon of nature writing on my own, with its hundreds of literary references that I can't make out, and millions of species that I can't name, is daunting.

The quicker route, I have found, is to have friendly, non-judgemental people provide you with an introduction. On visits to County Antrim, my Uncle John, a botanist, never seems to tire of my childlike pointing and questioning of the most basic elements of his garden. And the women I live with are wonderful, open people who put as much effort into meeting the neighbours as they do tending the garden. They have helped me to wake up to the nature peeping through the urban landscapes and the communities that support it—to begin separating the green from the grey. The paradox of living in a heaving, polluted metropolis like London is that it can actually help to bring you closer to nature: you can pour your daily rage into aggressively cultivating a small patch of green among the concrete.

And you can share the results. For all the hand-wringing over phone-addicted millennials who can't tell an apple from a blackberry, technology is actively helping to promote the value of the natural world. Researchers are using artificial intelligence to scan Instagram, Facebook and Flickr photos to determine, for example, why and how people use national parks, and whether people are more likely to visit lakes if the water is kept clean. Initiatives

like 30 Days Wild, a campaign from the UK's Wildlife Trusts, challenge participants to "do something wild" every day for 30 days and share photos of their exploits on social media. On Twitter, the Wildlife Trusts respond to user tweets about bees, butterflies and wildflowers, helping people to identify species and encouraging them to keep going for the rest of the month. The tone is optimistic and simple—two qualities in very short supply in both nature writing and the world of sustainability. Many would agree that there is something unsettling about scrolling Instagram in a bee-loud glade, but by capturing your moments in the wilderness you can show yourself and your followers that getting out and about in nature is fun and—critically—looks cool. Perhaps this will inspire others to follow you down the garden path, up the mountainside or under the waterfall, and consequently, do what's needed to protect these treasures.

Given the scale of the crisis facing our natural world, and the profundity of my and others' ignorance, new nature writing must aim to reach and inspire as many people as possible. To put it in millennial-friendly gym parlance: how can we take nature writing, zzuzzh it in a NutriBullet, add some protein powder and supercharge it for maximum results?

New nature writing for the common good could incorporate three guiding principles.

Firstly: *Consider your audience*. Where and how do the majority of your readers live? The world of today and tomorrow is increasingly urban, multi-ethnic and, unless we see a radical change in our social and economic systems, deeply unequal. People relate to what they see around them, and for most of us today, that means diverse cities made up of the excessively rich, the unacceptably poor and everyone in between. To inspire and instil a love of the natural world in future generations, nature writing must reach all members of this society. Take the intergenerational divide, for example. In the UK, polling company YouGov recently found that almost half (45%) of 18- to 24-year-olds believe environmental issues are one of the nation's three most pressing concerns, compared with 27% of the general population. If those youngsters are anything like me (and given that I have used the term "youngsters", we can safely assume that they are not) they may struggle to recognise the plants, animals and landscapes eulogised in classic nature writing. Conversely, how many older people know what is meant by a birb, a round boy, or a doge that borks? New nature writers must find ways to unite and appeal to both groups.

Second: *Simplicity*. Even as I type this, Microsoft Word has been correcting what I thought were hauntingly beautiful, literary turns of phrase—"consider using concise language" it suggests. Harsh, but if the algorithm dictates it, it must be so. And that means nature writers will have to gradually wean themselves off compound adjectives—no more wind-buffeted, no more rain-soaked, no more sun-yellowed. Of course there is a place for Thoreau, Wordsworth and Keats, for meticulously observed ditches and five hundred page tomes—but perhaps to win a few more hearts and minds in the fight to save the planet, we will need to go back to basics.

And finally, we must recognise that not every encounter with nature will be profound or even beneficial. If we expect a spiritual awakening every time, we will be disappointed. Weeding the garden, trudging through the rain, an Instagram post that didn't get as many likes as you'd expected—each of these is soul-crushing in its own way. As Zoe Gilbert wrote recently: "enchantment is not everywhere all the time"—or, as I like to put it: sometimes nature is crap.

...



Orlaith works on climate change and sustainability issues in Dublin. She discovered this year that human contact can actually be quite nice. Her time living in London inspired this essay.

## Afterword

*New Nature Writing: a force for sustainability and the common good?*

The New Wave of British Nature Writing shows no sign of breaking. This century has seen an outpouring of books—memoir, travel, and fiction, as well as natural history works—focusing on the countryside, our relationship with other creatures, and particular species and habitats. The field is dominated by the remarkable work of the academic and writer Robert Macfarlane, who has championed ‘lost’ nature writers such as JA Baker, author of *The Peregrine*, and Nan Shepherd, author of *The Living Mountain*, as well as producing his own influential books on walking, wilderness and the language of natural history.

The pandemic of 2020 might have pushed us all indoors for much of the past year, but it has almost certainly stimulated more desire to immerse ourselves in nature writing as well as in the natural world. Academic research increasingly reveals the extent to which our health and wellbeing are entwined with our access to the more-than-human world of other creatures, landscapes, the ‘great outdoors’. As the title of a new book (*The Consolation of Nature: Spring in the time of Coronavirus*, by Michael McCarthy, Jeremy Mynott and Peter Marren), on the ‘pandemic Spring’ of 2020 suggests, contact with nature offers us *consolations* in the face of human crises—and so does the genre of New Nature Writing.

Part of the appeal of nature writing in its long history in modern Britain—explored in the academic research project Land Lines—has been its evocation of a world that can give us respite, consolation and comfort in the face of industrial society’s relentless expansion. The major waves of nature writing can be seen as a response to a widespread experience of disruption, loss, fear and grief, as ‘nature’ is threatened by ‘development’. The last major surge of nature writing before this century came in the 1930s and 1940s, as writers responded to the large-scale expansion of towns and suburbs, eating into the countryside and eroding ‘traditional’ countryside and ways of life, and then to the fears generated by World War 2.

What accounts for the upsurge of nature writing in this century? Part of the answer must be the nostalgia and longing for the imagined comforts of rural life. Urban environments associated with stress, ugliness and work—and now with the intensification of pandemic—generate a desire to ‘escape to the country’. New nature writing meets a need for consolation and ‘nature therapy’. However, the lesson from previous waves of nature writing tells us to look at sources of threat, anxiety and loss to understand the deep sources of interest in the genre. The new popularity of nature writing surely reflects widespread and growing anxieties about urban people’s disconnection from the ‘natural world’, and about the implications of the global and local environmental crises we face—above all, climate disruption and the massive loss of biodiversity.

Many works in the new nature writing wave give evidence for this. As in the 1930’s surge of natural history and topographic writing—see for example the work of HJ Massingham—there is a sense that a mass stock-taking is under way, a fearful audit of what we’ve lost, what we stand to lose, and what that means for us. Nature writing intersects in this sense with the documentation by ecologists and environmental campaigners of loss of wildlife, landscapes and flora. Many nature writers clearly hope to be playing a part, by offering witness to the state of the natural world, in a large-scale consciousness-raising process.

If that is the case, we can ask whether the new nature writing is living up to that potential for raising awareness and bringing people to act in new ways to protect and appreciate the more-than-human world we’re embedded in. Can nature writing really be a force for ecological awareness-raising, and even more ambitiously, for helping save what we stand to lose? Can it add to the political and social movements for sustainable living and a reimagining of the good life, of sustainable prosperity, explored in the CUSP programme? In a recent journal paper written with Jon Ward<sup>1</sup> we examined the potential of NNW as a form of *arts activism*. How might the genre be engaged more effectively with our unfolding environmental crises, and help generate a collective and popular politics of nature conservation and re-connection of people, place, creatures and landscape?

In this study, we found that although the genre has produced many brilliant pieces of work over the past 20 years, persistent concerns arise about how far it can live up to its potential—and ambition—to help in a revaluation of attitudes, language and ways of life. The major issues we identify concern first, whether the types of writing being produced can connect to a *cooperative social and*

*political response* to the degradation underway of climate stability, ecosystems, landscapes and biodiversity; and second, whether there is enough *diversity of voice and place* in the present wave of nature writing.

The first concern is about the content of much of the new wave of work. What is striking are its *individual* focus and, within this, its emphasis on epiphany, therapy, lament and celebration. The writing often is about lone exploration of a place—or of many places, possibly expensively reached by the author—and about the translation of close hyper-sensitive attention to nature into fine prose. There is also a strong element of using the more-than-human world as the source of therapy for physical or mental afflictions. There is nothing wrong with this, and as we say, many wonderful works have emerged from the individualist-epiphanic mode of nature writing. However, this kind of writing is in tension with the ambition, whether explicit or unspoken, to help generate a new consciousness and new action concerning the conservation of the threatened places and creatures being written about. The author is a lone voice, offering up striking narratives of personal epiphany, and evoking grief, lament, loss and remembrance of what has gone or might soon be destroyed as the crises of unsustainable industrial development unfold.

We don't say that everyone writing in this mode should stop and move into political agitation. But we do wonder whether more of this style of nature writing is capable of connecting people to collective tasks of protection, restoration and renewal needed for effective action on the climate and biodiversity crises we face. What is missing in the new nature writing has been vivid documentary writing on the social and political dimensions of conservation and change in landscape and our relations with other creatures and habitats. The UK, under any conceivable combination of parties in government in coming years, is about to embark on massive programmes of change in environmental policy: farmers will be incentivised to produce ecological 'public goods' along with food crops; there will be many projects to 'rewild' degraded landscapes and to reintroduce lost species; there will be many more projects for urban greening; for re-forestation of the depleted woodlands of the UK; for radical decarbonization of agriculture and all our foundational systems of production and consumption. What will new nature writers do to connect to this huge agenda, and to the social, cultural and political contests at the grassroots that it will generate? We hope to see more nature writing that makes the inescapable social and political dimension of nature conservation and renewal—the generation of common cause and its complications—more of a priority in the telling of stories about our relations with the more-than-human world.

As for the range of authors and places, we hope to see a wider range of people of all ages and backgrounds, enter the field. That hope for more diversity is not a dismissal of the largely white male writers who have been to the fore so far. Rather, it's a recognition that the places and creatures we want to conserve, revive and enjoy need the efforts of every part of our society. That means the new nature writing needs more people from ethnic minorities, from suburbs and cities, young people and the elderly, and people in areas of outstanding natural neglect as well of outstanding natural beauty. And that feeling led to CUSP's commissioning of the competition that produced this collection—***Nature Writing for the Common Good***. We wanted to play a part in expanding the range of authors and opening up new subject matter, with the social and political challenges of cooperative action in mind.

We're glad to have stimulated a rich response from unpublished authors, and to have enthused our expert and distinguished panel of judges, all contributors themselves to nature writing in diverse ways. We're also pleased to see that since our project was launched, numerous prizes and other initiatives have been set up to promote more diversity of voice and content in the new nature writing.

The genre is thriving, but the world it describes in such attentive and impassioned ways is not. The loss of wildlife, landscapes and resilience in the UK's countryside and cities has been immense and it will take a huge effort of collective will and resources to put it right, and to do so while we also tackle the climate crisis. New nature writing in the 2020s and beyond needs more diversity of voice and a richer social dimension, if it is to live up to its potential and ambition as a means of raising and consciousness and being a catalyst for new values and ways of living.

Ian Christie & Kate Oakley



#### Notes

1 | Oakley, Ward and Christie 2018. Engaging the imagination: 'new nature writing', collective politics and the environmental crisis. *Environmental Values* 27 (6): 687-705.





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