

# This Is Our Place

A Nature Writing Anthology



SPREAD  
THE WORD

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‘Tennis Court Glade’ and ‘Garden Escapee’ © Elspeth Wilson

‘Legacy Of South London Oaks’ © Jackee Holder

‘Time Moves, People Grow’, ‘Songs of Pollen’ and  
‘Things your mother tells you’ © Laura Barker

‘flutterbys and fingerhats’ © LiLi K. Bright

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## Preface

This Is Our Place was created to challenge the status quo of nature writing, which for the most part has been the preserve of a monoculture of male, middle class, white authors. By focusing on London's green spaces, which occupy 47% of the city, the project was to be a timely intervention to connect diverse, local communities with writing workshops and an opportunity to publish new writing. Then in 2020 nature took a turn for the worse.

In the months that followed, as we redefined our sense of inner and outer space, we found truth in nature. Footfall to the London Wildlife Trust sites doubled over the lockdown months, as people took full advantage of exercise as means to leave the home. Home for those who needed to shield was redefined as we brought nature to our living rooms, balconies and gardens.

After a postponement, Spread the Word launched This Is Our Place in August 2021 with a series of workshops online and in person at the London Wildlife Trust centres in Peckham, Woodberry Down and Walthamstow with five writers in residence: Anita Sethi, Elspeth Wilson, Jackee Holder, Laura Barker and LiLi K. Bright. This was followed by the call for submissions for this anthology for new writing in poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction. The quality of writing of the entries was consistently high, so much so the writers in residence decided that all entries should be featured in this book.



We are delighted to share this writing with you, which not only expands on the canon of nature writing, it reflects London and the world beyond through new lenses, whilst also redefining our sense of place. Whether at home, at the park, or the spaces in between, nature is all around us. And there has never been a greater urgency to help protect it. We hope you enjoy reading this anthology and support these talented writers.

Bobby Nayyar  
Spread the Word  
October 2021

## Acknowledgements

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The Emergence Foundation for funding this project.

London Wildlife Trust for partnering and hosting us at their centres.

The writers in residence: Anita Sethi, Elspeth Wilson, Jackee Holder, Laura Barker and LiLi K. Bright.

The contributors who entered the call for submissions: Anita Goveas, Aparna Sivasankar, Arden Fitzroy, Becky Bone, Bethan James, Caroline Gardiner, Christina Gestra, Cristina Reynoso, Daniel Grimston, Dhruti Shah, Dionne Williams, Duranka Perera, Elizabeth Uter, Ella King, Emily Gaywood-James, Farhana Khalique, Gurnam Bubber, Hannah Marshall, Jaya Gajparia, Jess Glaisher, Kia Watt, Linda Tieu, Mandi Maripise, Martha Aroha, Martin Milton, Miriam Nicholson-Butcher, Mo, Pia Dawson, Pippa Wildwood, Poonam Madar, Qudsia Mirza, Rosaleen Lynch, Shannon Howard, Steph Morris, 森子 sumchi, and Wenzday Jones.

Cover photographer: Kashif Haque.

Book designer and typesetter: Katrina Clark.

## **this place i come**

Pia Dawson

here i tread this place i  
come to clear my head to see more  
sky and feel more  
small and fill my  
lungs with splendid  
air and dodge the  
slugs and wonder  
at this thing dug out by  
hand and full of migrant bird and  
bug a terrapin i spotted  
once the towers hollowed out to  
husks the wrecking balls all quiet  
now and midges muddle now it's  
dusk a football floating in the  
rush my footfall even in the  
hush and here i  
tread this universe of tiny eyes and wings and  
legs this lake a haven here for  
(some of) us the ones who gather here at dusk to  
sing and chirp and cheep and calm our  
minds to help us sleep so here i  
tread the gate ahead they'll lock it  
soon but not just  
yet a willow

wet and weeping glowing  
green against the evening  
light inside it's like a holy  
space a fleeting feeling in  
my place then on again i  
go and here i tread

## **Virginia is for Lovers**

Emily Gaywood-James

Fiction

Summer is coming to an end, the way it always does: suddenly, impossibly, inevitably. The last campers have gone home, the humid Virginia air seems cooler now than it did a few weeks ago. It's your last night here, your last evening together. Your flight back to London leaves tomorrow.

She convinces you to sneak down to the creek once everyone else has gone to bed, and the two of you hold your breath as you tiptoe down the long set of wooden stairs for the last time. You aren't allowed to go down to the waterfront without a lifeguard present, but it will be fine, you tell each other, totally fine. Dusk is fading into dark, and in the half-light you see a bald eagle flying overhead. You stop and watch as it swoops lower, lower, landing briefly on the gnarled wood of the old pier before it launches itself into the air once more.

When you reach the water's edge, the shore is quiet. The sound of girls chatting and laughing has been replaced by the steady hum of the cicadas, of mosquitos buzzing around the beam of light from your torch, small instruments in the orchestra that's been playing the symphony of your summer.

The moon is full, illuminating the surface of the water. It seems to dance where the current flows, a patchwork of colours: dark blues and purples and pinks. You've never seen it so beautiful. You take off your trainers and socks, place them carefully on the benches

next to the fire pit you sang campfire songs around just an hour or two earlier. The air still smells like ash and smoke, and you know it's in your hair, your clothes, your skin. It feels like you will never be able to soak it off, and if you're honest you aren't sure you want to.

You wade into the water together and look out over the creek. It's cold, it always is, no matter how high the temperature outside might be. Your toes wriggle against the stones beneath them, slick with algae and moss. Normally you wear a life jacket down here, but neither of you want to brave the old storage shed in the dark to find one. You slip your hand into hers instead, a new kind of life jacket you're trying on for size. You go deeper, the tide lapping at the hem of your shorts.

You've never kissed her. You both know that there's something between you, something unspoken, but relationships between co-workers are strictly forbidden here. You'd been shocked, back when this was discussed so frankly during training. You hadn't imagined those kinds of relationships flourishing within an all-female staff. How wrong you'd been.

You stand together in silence: there's too much to say to say anything at all. A firefly flits past you and her blonde hair glints in the light that trails behind it. The air around you seems to crackle with expectation and possibility.

'I don't want to leave,' you whisper, your voice breaking. She looks at you, her eyes as big and as bright as the full moon above. They're wet with tears. She too has a place to fly home to, a plane ticket tucked safely inside her suitcase. She'll travel the US for a few weeks before heading back to Melbourne, the summer there just getting underway. She starts university after Christmas. Distance

between London and Melbourne, you'd typed into Google a few days previously during your evening off, your phone barely holding onto the WiFi at Target as you sat in the toilet cubicle and waited for the search results to load. Your stomach sank when you saw the answer. 10,000 miles is a long way.

When she kisses you, you taste the summer on her lips: watermelon and s'mores and the frozen milkshakes you both love from the convenience store at the local strip mall. Like your time together, your kiss is fleeting, over before it really began. You rest your head on her shoulder and she squeezes your hand in response. You linger, trying to drink in every detail of this moment, standing too long in the cold creekwater though the hairs on your arms are raised and your skin is covered in goosebumps.

You realise you're clenching your teeth. You don't want her to see you cry, so you let go of her hand and turn back to the shore. Your feet are still wet as you put on your socks, but the discomfort is a comfort in itself. You stop on the way up the stairs to catch your breath and for a second you think you might kiss again, but somehow you both know it's best if you leave things just as they are. The moment passes; she pulls a goofy face and takes the rest of the stairs at a sprint. You can barely keep up, and when you reach the top she's already halfway to her cabin, her silhouette disappearing into the darkness, her laughter swallowed by the evening air.

## **The Window**

Cristina Reynoso

every Morning – every time I open my eyes  
I wake up to a window  
that whispers – or shouts – the Weather secrets  
it tells me about windy sapphires sunny rocks  
rainy leaves  
grey wonders  
yellow bubbles  
sometimes I ask the window for an answer longing for my  
hometown  
across the Ocean, across one million Clouds  
it replies  
with a gloomy and bare Tree during the winter  
or a cheerful cherry blossom Tree in the spring  
or a magnificent green Tree in the summertime  
or with the occasional  
Cat  
Fox  
Squirrel  
Crow  
or any other member of the London Urban Fauna Club  
every Day, every Night, every time I close my eyes  
I rest reassured  
I am home here  
too.



## **Songs of the Trees**

Kia Watt

Creative Non-Fiction

The sudden rattling call of a magpie startles me. Its harsh call quickly ascends into a hearty cackle as if it has heard a particularly humorous joke. I smile and wish it would tell me. I need to hear something funny or just anything. But people aren't in the habit of joking or even just talking to me. I wish they would. The trouble is I don't know what to say or where to look when anyone does. I try to look at their face but it feels unnatural and my eyes dart everywhere like a ping-pong ball in a washing machine. Alternatively I end up staring until it feels so horribly uncomfortable I have to get away. There is no meeting of minds and they don't want to talk to me again. So it gets lonely.

I was watching the clock pendulum, following its steady movements when the magpie called. I hear it again and cross the small room to the window. I lift the net curtains and peer out. Although the late summer sun is behind a mass of pewter-coloured clouds I squint and wait for my eyes to adjust. I search round but don't see the flashing white and black feathers of the laughing magpie. He has flown far away.

From the third-floor window I look across at a row of asymmetric blocks of flats with dark-coloured bricks placed in geometric patterns against a light background. They've been built in recent years and still look fresh. They are in stark contrast to the children's playground between them and my block. The playground

once had a seesaw and a collection of metal animals mounted on thick springs but they are long gone, damaged by foul-mouthed, spitting youths and then removed by the council. Where they stood there are holes in the once brightly coloured rubber floor, now faded and tired looking.

The park is bordered by metal railings and hedges trimmed into box shapes with razor-sharp edges. They look neat but uncomfortable, like they haven't had the opportunity to grow and choose their own way in this world. Like they've had to conform to their surroundings, the flats in rows with straight edges. They are strangers in disguise, made up to resemble everything around them because that is how the world works.

But below the soil and dirt, though littered with the odd can, their roots grow in all directions plunging into the depths of the earth, stretching out into fantastic twisting and turning shapes, anywhere they want. Except people don't see their uniqueness only what is above, on show to an uncompromising world.

It's exhausting to always adjust so as to fit in. Except I don't really fit in. The best I can manage is to make myself tolerable by being polite and listening. Always listening, though none of it interests me. I watch people interact; shriek, exclaim and pull faces and I don't know what to do. If I speak, my voice is quickly drowned out and my throat constricts with another rejection. I can't talk about what I want because it's unconventional or rather "atypical." So I listen and nod until my mind stretches into the far distance, searching for somewhere to belong.

A car glides along the narrow street, the whoosh sounding like a deep sigh. My eyes are drawn past the playground to the familiar

row of small field maples lining the street. From a distance the dark canopy of the maple reminds me of a head of frizzy hair, growing out in lines. I look forward to autumn when the leaves change into a rich golden yellow, before the tree shakes its head scattering leaves to the wind.

I always liked to stop under these trees, noticing each leaf; shiny, dark-green and five-lobed. And the fruits hanging in yellow-green clusters tinged with a rich pink hue. The trouble is I haven't been going out anymore; it's harder because of the long months spent in lockdown. Going outside was always difficult but now it feels almost impossible.

I found the noise too much; growling motorbikes, sirens and people bellowing and gesticulating at images on tiny screens. The pungent smell of car exhaust fumes mingled with foul water in blocked drains. Then the constant rush of people as if they were in a race and speeding bicycles that seemed to materialise out of thin air. Car headlights and flashing images on flat-screen TVs dazzled me. My head would start to spin and my heart would beat faster and harder until the skin on my face burned. The panic, confusion and sudden surges of anger made me want to scream until all the breath left my body and I crumpled into a lifeless heap.

Although it was tough, I found ways of coping. I would stop and look up at the tops of trees – the branches, leaves, bowl-shaped nests and bits of sky. The vastness seemed to stretch beyond the distance between life and death. Numerous tall London Planes with their hanging seed balls like decorative baubles and their distinctive olive-green and grey bark resembling camouflage as if they're sentries keeping guard. And slim silver birches with their

relaxed and drooping posture, their whispered songs carried forth with each gust of wind. And broad sycamores stretching their long limbs across the vast sky and their leaves like friendly, waving hands. I would lay my hand on the swirls and ridges of the bark and, for a brief moment, sense a throbbing like a beating heart.

I push the window open; the air is cooler and fresh. I squint as a ray of sunshine bursts through a hole in the wall of clouds. The breeze picks up and I close my eyes. From the distance I hear the faint swish of leaves, calling.

## Wild Consequences of a Section 114

Becky Bone

A beanstalk grows through a crack in the curb on the edge of the  
Croydon Flyover.

Eyes peer to the left, searching for it, like a  
good luck charm, like I must see it on my drive to work in Peckham  
or else

my day will be shit.

I've seen it every Monday-Friday morning between 7-7:15  
depending on how many times I pressed snooze since the end of July.

Two feet tall, leaves spikey, stem straight  
reaching

for the full ominous clouds of August.

I imagine stopping illegally. Click. A photo.

I imagine doing this each day.

I imagine planting a camera in the tree spreading over the  
flyover recording hours of the beanstalk's life like they do on

Planet Earth, lapsing time to show the

power of the plant

growing unwanted on grass verges, sprouting through  
playground tarmac, wrapping around climbing frames,  
growing between Bricks, by Bricks in Croydon whilst  
half built blocks of flats

wrapped in tarpaulin cast shadows over lines of people  
wrapped around council offices waiting for  
cups of tea and bags of imperishables.

I want this beanstalk to grow like Jack's: its end  
invisible, its stem swaying, its root surrounded by  
people pointing up at children jumping leaf to leaf to  
wake giants and empty their bags of  
gold pouring down over this town.

But this isn't a fairy-tale,  
this is Croydon.

## Sonder

Dionne Williams

I leave the world and just enter

A cosmos; transporting my fleshy vessel through a nebula

Into my home. A universe of plants, flora and ferns taken from the wilderness;

Some are mothers, lone wolves, parasites and healers with their bitterness.

They carve out spaces on floors, walls and furniture, reaching out for the light,

As I explore their ethereal enchantments that shine and shimmer in delight.

Colourful fireworks in shapes of petals releasing in violent bursts, blooming

Raining down their pollen like volcanic ash above a quiet landscape looming.

Their idyllic prayers are distilled in the crisp air, offering up droplets back into the soil,

I receive them with gratitude as I prune and pick their yellow and brown mortal coils.

My fingers rotate their ceramic pots, changing their course of orbit each season,

Encouraging their deep verdant green to expand like Adam and Eve in Eden.

Sonder overcomes me as I revere the new shoots appear as if swift

A noble and wondrous gift.

Suddenly Awakening

To their true beginnings.

Being aware of self,

Unison of cells

Harmonising,

Becoming

Present.

Lush.



## **Legacy Of South London Oaks**

Jackee Holder

Creative Non-Fiction

There are many notable oak trees, trees that hold local significance in the part of South London where I live. For example there's Honor Oak, the former site of three Oak trees where it was rumoured that in 1602 Elizabeth I stopped for a rest on route to Lewisham. Then a little further south on a tree lined street in Brixton lives an old aging oak tree I named, Old Henry.

Old Henry, at over 600 years old is a craggily looking oak tree, its fragility wired with a sturdiness that speaks to its ancientness; oak trees can live for up to 1,000 years. If you peer close enough you'll see the face of an old man etched into its upper branches hence the tree's nickname. According to legend, the oak tree was a favourite picnic spot for Queen Elizabeth I when visiting Sir Walter Raleigh who lived locally.

Many years ago, twenty two years to be exact, I became personally acquainted with an oak tree that lives not too far away from the home of Old Henry that resides in what was then my local park, Brockwell park in South London.

It was the summer of 1999 and it all began the moment I coaxed myself off the sofa and out the front door for a short run. At school I was a fast runner, dominating the 100 and 200 metres for the entire length of my secondary school career. But that day it was as if my body intuitively knew that it was time to do something different. I needed air, to be out in nature and even though I did not

know at the time it was the beginning of my journey to becoming acquainted with the trees that inhabited the city I was born in and lived in for all my life.

At that time I was an emotional mess and identified as a queer black woman, raising a daughter desperate to shape an identity and life that was of my own making and not be defined by the expectations of others. The relationship I was in was challenging and even though I had not realised how lost I was at the time I was fast sinking into a black hole of depression.

That day I made it around my local park without stopping, triumphant at having achieved one positive thing for the day. As I hit the last stretch of my run I noticed a tree in the distance and decided this was where I would end my run. It was not long before I found myself under the sprawling canopy of an evergreen holm oak tree. It was early afternoon and apart from the odd dog walker here and there I had the space to myself. The calmness I felt standing under the tree's canopy felt intoxicating. Its upper branches limbered downwards flush with thousands of leaves swamping the branches that fell down sweeping the green grass below. The space inside was an echo chamber of quiet as the tree's leafage absorbed the sounds and noise of the outside world providing a welcome refuge from the swirling thoughts that devoured my mind daily. I found myself back there again the next day and the day after that and in a blink I began making a daily pilgrimage to what would become my mentor tree.

\*

London is home to 8 million trees and of the 8 million, 3 million are oak trees. Many of the oak trees in this part of South London

are descendants from the oak trees that formed part of the Great North Wood that once populated this area of South London stretching between Deptford and Croydon. In fact the oldest Oak tree in London is The Royal Oak in Richmond park, which is rumoured to be around 750 years.

There are two species of oak trees native to the UK, Sessile Oak (*Quercus Petraea*) and English Oak (*Quercus Robur*). Oak trees have a rich cultural history rooted in the customs and rituals of the indigenous peoples of the British Isles, the Druids and Celts who worshipped in sacred oak groves and the ancient kings and queens and Roman emperors wore crowns made from oak leaves.

My daily appointments with Sanctuary (as I named her) continued for several months. The space I inhabited each morning in the company of my adopted oak tree became my yoga mat, my prayer space, my writing space, a natural cathedral.

Just like some people visit the therapist's office weekly, my daily tree visits became its own form of therapy, silent and nourishing. Sanctuary listened without judging. Its presence helped me to ground my thoughts and feelings, reduce the negative emotions I was so caught up in. Its presence felt oddly comforting and reassuring. It was not long before I had adopted the Sanctuary as my own arboreal mentor.

\*

In 2006 I moved home and leaving Sanctuary behind was like saying goodbye to a dear close friend I had become used to spending daily quality time with. So whilst physically I was no longer able to visit my mentor tree as frequently as before, instead I

carried Sanctuary with me as a picture in my imagination. I carried photos of my Sanctuary on my phone and pasted images of the tree into my journals and notebooks. Numerous research studies confirm that even looking at pictures of trees and nature generates improvements physically and psychologically.

What surprised me most as I got into the flow of writing this piece was how far back this tree actually was rooted in my life story. I soon realised through the writing and research that there were a ton of memories this tree had over the years witnessed as I went about life growing up.

I grew up in the Black Pentecostal church and for many years as I moved through childhood a younger version of that tree would have been a silent witness to our family's membership of a black church located on Dulwich road, in the basement of a house right across the road from Brockwell Park. I smile as I think about a young Sanctuary from its perch, viewing our family of six stuffed into Dad's bottle green Morris minor as we travelled to church on Sunday mornings and back home on Sunday afternoons for several years in the 1960s.

It would have been this same tree that would have caught sight of the young nine-year-old Jackee standing at the 68 bus stop on Norwood Road decked out in a pair of shiny red patent leather shoes and white ankle socks with frills at the top, wearing a white dress with red spots with matching red spotted ribbons attached to the end of several plaits as I headed back home from afternoon Sunday School.

And even before this I imagine a tree half its size and height that would have watched the unfoldment of an earlier cherished memory of me arriving through the iron park gates at the bottom of the path leading up to where the tree still stands, clutching onto

the hands of my favourite Uncle Keith, my Dad's brother taking me and my brother to the funfair at Brockwell Park around 1968. It was a Saturday afternoon. I could not contain the giddy excitement of my six-year-old self. Mum allowed me to choose my outfit, a pair of pink trousers and a floral-patterned blouse. I remember the secure warmth of holding my uncle's hand and floating down Norwood High Street, the happiest girl in the world.

Later as a teenager visits to the funfair, Sanctuary would have spotted me in the distance sporting a large Afro hairdo, wearing Black Bally or Kurt Geiger shoes with a gold chain across the front of each shoe complete with a black pleated skirt topped off with a patterned twin sets of matching jumper and cardigan. Years later I could be found dancing my heart out at the annual Pride festival whose home was in Brockwell Park back in the early days of the Pride Festival. And finally a warming memory of a marriage ceremony blessing I performed in my role as an interfaith minister under the oldest oak tree in the park not far from where Sanctuary stands today.

Trees soak up snapshots of our lifetimes, they are arboreal memorials, capturing days of our lives stored in the wooded museums of their wood wide web, in their bark and fleshy timber.

Sanctuary is one of thousands of oak trees populating this region of South London for centuries. The presence of Oak trees across London parks, streets and private gardens is gratifying, supplemented by their size and ecological generosity supporting more wildlife than any other tree species. Such is the vital presence of oak trees absorbing our culture and lived experiences, becoming one of the capital's oldest living eyes and wood monuments across the city.

## Eclipsed

Rosaleen Lynch

Fiction

The sun eclipsed looks like a crescent moon, but it's just day instead of night and I can't look, though I do, like when we once watched the moon move across the sky, or like how I wait at night and watch for you, through the phases of the moon in the month, yes, the sun eclipsed looks like a crescent moon but the bite is not for long, and I forget the shadow of your head in front of the kitchen bulb that's stopped swinging, now the lampshade, once globe-like, is concave on floor beside me, with the broken plates and what was going to be dinner, if that pea hadn't rolled, with the wobble of the table leg, not off the plate but to touch the steak, and if the world hadn't turned, and if my centre of gravity hadn't shifted in the third trimester, with my full-belly moon, now on my back, the horizon illusion making it appear bigger than it is, but you say I make everything seem bigger than it is, when it's just the way the world goes round and though I sing along, punching the air to those power ballads and feminist anthems on the radio, maybe you're right, maybe we have no choice about our orbits, maybe we three are bound together like the sun and earth and moon, in syzygy like in *The X-Files*, and maybe that's why we are how we are and why I know you won't touch me again until I heal, until the ring marks fade and the shadows clear from my skin the way the features of your face disappeared in the dark, yes, the sun eclipsed looks like a crescent moon and I know the vicious circle that means I'm ready

to leave now but can't, and as I get better I forget I want to leave, though I can more easily, but the gravitational pull is always too strong, so I wait for the next meteor to hit, some astronomical event that will knock my world off course, stop the same night turning into the same day into the same night into... and now I feel wet between my legs, and under me, damp warmth soaking into my skirt, maybe my waters breaking early, and I can't look but I do, and I watch a tide of red spread out from my body, in a bloody crescent moon and this time I dial those three numbers and stay on the line, close my eyes, the phone lying on its side by my ear, telling me they're coming, these aliens are coming to take over my world, and I wake in sunlight and a stranger's head throws shadow on my face, they wear a police cap and I'm moved into the darkness of the ambulance, leaving the light behind.

## **Our Sycamore**

Steph Morris

Bossy trees, they flatten the lot  
with their blanket leaves, block out  
the sky, spread shade, soak up joy  
and sponge from the soil,  
but ivy has got the better of this one,  
gripped its trunk, run up it and off  
along its limbs where the squirrels whirl  
and chase and gnaw and chomp.  
We hacked those grasping branches back  
to leave a bushy column, deep green  
all year. Here the robins nest, bats  
roost, magpies flap, eggshells fall,  
seeds sprout on the ground beneath,  
and we have it for what we want, for all.



## The Life Span of Cherry Trees

Anita Goveas

Fiction

Everyone hated the flowering cherry tree outside their pebble-dashed house apart from Neisha. The dwarf '*Pink Perfection*' unexpectedly grew so big its canopy shaded the front garden, its branches almost stretched to her bedroom window, and the grass underneath it turned brown and dry. But the music of the wind in the leaves blew her to sleep most nights, as she lay awake listing reasons why it should stay.

'When a cherry tree blooms, it's symbol of renewal,' she told her mother over reheated rotis, as she tried to get her little brother to eat his utma and her mother studied the 'Help Wanted' page in *The Times*. Darsh spat sticky grains over the darned blue tablecloth, her mother sighed like breeze sighing through cracked bark, at the paper, the breakfast or Neisha's unhelpful persistence.

'You can eat the blossoms, we could pickle them instead of making lime aachaar?' she said to her older sister as they folded warm laundry together. Hemal sighed, she'd planted crocuses and tulips every year and knew why they didn't grow.

'It's not going to live much longer anyway, it's already fourteen like me, and their life spans are sometimes only fifteen years,' she told her father as soon as he walked in from another late evening at the bank. But he had his own list, he turned away to hang up his blazer and replied, 'It hardly ever flowers, the dead blossoms clog up the gutter, the neighbours have complained. It has to go.'

Neisha didn't sleep at all that night, silent expectation pooled in the base of her neck. It wouldn't rub away. She whispered apologies, pleas for forgiveness to her secret comfort but everything wrapped itself in the velvet deadness of the dark. The wind intensified outside, swirled over the porch and ripped through dead tulip remnants. At exactly midnight on her digital clock, a *tap-tap-tap* danced across her window. Neisha pressed her face on the cool glass, blinked into the gloom but nothing was there.

In the morning, the whole family stared at the detested cherry tree. A storm had blasted it, upended it almost entirely. It lay split in pieces, limbs pointing in all directions, one root still grasping the ground, as if it had tried to remake itself into a tractable thing. A pointed spear-like branch brushed Neisha's window, but left no marks. Her father pressed her shoulder as he gathered up splintered pieces to take to the dump, the only acknowledgement of her loss and her escape. Crocuses grew back from their neglected bulbs, but the slender sprig of tree that remained never blossomed. Neisha never asked for anything again.

## September Song

Caroline Gardiner

My eyes are ever-fastened to the earth.  
A slip, a trip, a fall brings days in bed,  
And sleep-lost nights of doubting my life's worth,  
The moon and stars from darkened windows fled.  
While cruel September coaxes children out,  
To pond dip, leaf scuff, cloud watch, climb bare trees,  
Gorge tart brambles, echo the woods with shouts,  
Nature I dare not touch and barely see.  
But. Standing still, a leaf falls on my hair  
And crinkles into golden pepper dust  
Below, the bees dance, drunk on full ripe pears  
A fox cub barks, its scent throat-catching must.  
Now, looking up, the geese come calling home.  
The wind tastes sharp. My pathway's not yet known.

## **Your 3x Tickets to Kew Gardens**

Linda Tieu

Creative Non-Fiction

The award for the best daughter in the world goes to >>>> me.

Xmas 2016. With my entry level London salary. I treat my parents and buy tickets for a trip Kew Gardens. What a lovely gift. They will love it. They've never been before. They're of that age. Why haven't bro and sis thought of this? It's a great idea. £40 spent on 3 tickets. 6 hours + 2-hour drive for them + 30 mins to find a parking space. 1 hour on the green line for me.

beep. beep. beep. Tickets scanned, we head towards one of the greenhouses. We walk through the glass doors. A sudden rush of humidity envelopes us. They immediately complain about the heat. And I start to think (how did they live their first 16 years in a tropical climate?) I guess they've had to acclimatise in more ways than one.

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 Map of Kew Gardens: (n.b. not accurate. 40% from memory. the rest from imagination.)

```

ENTRANCE ===== | |                ===== [2] Banana Tree
                  | |                | |
                [1] Coconut Palm Tree | |                | |
                  =====                | |
===== | | =====
| |                [3] Unknown Tree
| |                [5] Bamboo Tree
| |                | | ===== | |
| |  [4] some grass | |                | |
===== | | =====                | |
                                           EXIT
  
```

[1] Coconut Palm Tree (Latin: *Cocos nucifera*) (Vietnamese: *cây dừa*)  
 Dad says that when he was in his teens he used to drive his little moped and park it under a coconut tree. He'd climb the tree, knock off a coconut and pound it with a stone to drink. I try to imagine my dad as a teen. I can't as he's always had a moustache since I've been around.

[2] Banana Tree (Latin: *Musa acuminata*) (Vietnamese: *cây chuối*)  
 I can't see any bananas in this tree. But mum says you can use the banana blossom to make mean salads. By 2021, banana blossom has become the next big vegan substitute. Apparently it makes for a good vegan fish-n-chips.

[3] Unknown Tree (Vietnamese: *tôi không biết?*)

Mum says she recognises this tree but she can't remember what it's called.

[4] some grass (Vietnamese: *cỏ*)

Mum has always had a real phobia of snakes. She tells me during her walks to and from school, snakes used to hide in grasses like these. Now I know why she's so scared of them. On the other hand, Dad says one of his favourite past times was to fling off the tails of translucent geckos with rubber bands. They both share a dislike for squirrels now.

[5] Bamboo Tree (Latin: *Bambusoideae*) (Vietnamese: *cây tre*)

Dad says these grow really really high. They grow in clusters and they don't stop growing. They say bamboo symbolises the spirit of the Vietnamese people.

He tells me they place summer roll paper on criss-crossed slabs of bamboo for them to dry off.

I'm hungry.

-----  
ENTRANCE ===== CAFÉ ===== we stop at the  
café and eat cheese and pickle sandwiches ===== EXIT  
-----

ANOTHER GATE

	===== [7] Black Peppercorn Tree	
===== [6] Tamarind Tree		
	[7] Pond.	
	Lotus Flower	
ANOTHER EXIT =====	=====	

[6] Tamarind Tree (Latin: *Tamarindus indica*) (Vietnamese: *cây me*)  
I honestly thought tamarind fruits grew from the ground. A bit like a potato. But my mum tells me they are actually huge trees that grow really big just like an oak tree. My favourite dish my mum makes is *canh chua* (hot and sour soup) and tamarind is what makes it sour. Sadly I can never find it in menus with my mates on Kingsland Road.

[7] Black Peppercorn Tree (Latin: *Piper nigrum*) (Vietnamese: *cây hạt tiêu*)

Last year my Viet uncle came to visit us and he once ran out of our house without any shoes when he first saw snow. He's a black peppercorn farmer and Vietnam is one of the largest black peppercorn producers in the world. Our surname also means black peppercorn in Vietnamese. It's good to know we add a bit of flavour to everyone's lives.

Dad's wandered off and now we've lost him.

[8] Lotus Flower (Latin: *Nelumbo nucifera*) (Vietnamese: *hoa sen*)

The first and only time I went to Vietnam was with my family a couple of years before. I remember reading that the lotus flower is the national flower of Vietnam. Its beauty creeps out of muddy waters. it symbolises purity, commitment and optimism for the future.

-----

TOILETS==== Mum and I queue for the toilets for approximately  
===== 14 minutes.

-----

We find dad. He looks at his watch. I can sense he's bored and tired. I now realise through the eyes of mum and dad, tickets to Kew were not so impressive. For them, the 'Royal Botanic Gardens' was simply a trip down memory lane of their everyday life back in Vietnam over 40 years ago. But with | additional parameters, walls and signposts. |

I ask them what they want to do for the rest of the day and they both say:

----

Can we go home now?



## Duppy Tree

Elizabeth Uter

I remember Jamaica, the resort, walking to my brother's room,  
to the right, a sense of sin, darkness tapping at my shoulder  
on this jewel-like Caribbean day, the world stands still,  
scooping me up, thrusting me before a squatting tree  
- everything holds its breath, the grass, the sun, windows,  
me, even a mongoose quivers, turns its back -  
it smelt of suppurating wounds, the kind that twitches  
the nose in hospitals, oozing, refusing to crust.

Dense with thinking, alive for centuries,  
thick roots like gnarling, uncut toenails slithering  
towards me, reminiscent of the curling horns of goats  
- elongating, spiralling, taking up all available space.  
A housemaid, trolley filled with linen, pulls me away, whispers  
'is a slave tree, Miss, a cotton tree where many hang.'  
There and there, she points to cracks - stuffed inside -  
notes on rags, full of curses, blessings, prayers  
for release from the day of writing.

A wishing well or evil tree? Majestic, clouding my mind  
as it snags the sky, crowding out the rest of the world.  
I later learn from the barman, Joe, it houses spirits of the slain  
who sip marrow from the living once given the chance  
- there are also gruesome souls sealed in bottles within -  
he nods his sage head, advising me to stay away.  
My brother asks to move rooms, realising why it's cheaper

than the rest, says he cannot sleep, shifting in his bed  
until it's light, pacing, peering through an open window,  
sensing nothing, no tree frogs, no crickets. It is the stillness  
of the graveyard dead. He hears a local titter: 'is a duppy tree,  
you couldn't even pay me to sleep near an' me love money.'

## Blue Tit

Ella King

Fiction

I see the pair of blue tits as soon as I enter Robert's office. This is the most active they've been in a while, frenzied even, darting down and then returning with spoils that they thrust into the beaks of their fledglings.

*Sit down, Rachel, anywhere you like.*

I take the seat at Robert's conference table that faces outside. It's the only spot where he can mistake me looking out the window with an avid focus on him.

*I'm sure you've had a chance to look at your evaluation. We're impressed, you're doing incredibly well.*

I can't see the birds from my office, although it's right next to Robert's and has a window with the same view. Associates don't face the window. The computer monitors do instead. That way, Robert and the other senior lawyers can satisfy themselves that you're working just by glimpsing your screen in the reflection. It's clever, really, efficient. How they turned windows for looking out into windows for looking in.

*Legal and technical skills – we've rated you excellent this year.*

This year, my daughter, Zoe, started asking me what I do on the four days I don't spend with her. What a lawyer does is difficult to explain to a four-year-old – the endless conference calls, the advice, the bartering over words – so I started telling her about the blue tits living in the oak outside Robert's office.

I told her how the female's wings are bright when I see her alone but next to her mate, the azure takes on a grey. I told her how I'd seen her fly up to the branches with a beak of moss, a mass of pink thread. She was nesting.

*Professional skills – full marks for those too.*

Zoe questioned me about them every morning over breakfast cereal: was the nest finished, were there any chicks? When I had nothing to report, she was disappointed. I fed her titbits I looked up instead: eggs in a nest are called a 'clutch'; the shells are cream flecked with brown.

*Client skills, well, this is where you've outdone yourself.*

That was how I found out what was happening. The blue tits were struggling. A late spring had delayed the budding of the oaks, which halted the hatch of caterpillars. But the birds hadn't delayed. Now, out of sync, they were out of food. My daughter, braver than me, came to the point quicker: 'The babies are dying?'

*Arrow is pleased. Nothing seems to phase you. Every demand, every need, you know exactly how to handle them.*

Arrow is pleased because I excel at liability clauses. Or, to be precise, the limitation of liability. We are liable for this and not that. Definitely not that.

*Clients like you.*

When did it occur to me that the clients who liked me were the people who delayed the spring? It can't be proven of course, that mining across the other side of the world contributes to fluctuations in London seasons, I even know the legal term for this, it's called 'the remoteness of damage.' But there are some juries I am powerless before. Like the jury of my daughter's eyes.

*Top scores across the board.*

When I told Zoe I was going to feed them, the little conservationist gave me things, torn crusts, halved grapes saved from nursery lunches and crammed into the corners of her pocket. She pressed them urgently into my palm. My heart is in my throat at her kindness.

*Which leads me to a delicate subject. We'd like you to come back full time.*

I supplemented their diet by digging up worms, carrying them into work in a jar, laying the writhing, sightless offerings at the shrine of the oak, my lunch-time absolution.

*I know you've been working late hours –*

Zoe leaves food on a small plate in the fridge when I work late. The sight of that plate lifts me after torrid journeys home. A few weeks ago, getting off the last train home, something jerked in the shadows at the end of the underpass. I wanted to run, but it ran first, a fox cub sprinting into the brambles. The nights morph the wonderful into something feared.

*– but it's not the same as working full-time.*

One of the fledglings emerges from the nest, its claws gripping the branch. Its parents keep feeding it, dropping into the open circle of its mouth Zoe's toast, an earthworm from my garden. Its breast is a dash of canary yellow, its tailfeathers are still a fuzzed grey.

*It's not just about what the business needs. People like you, intelligent girls, I mean women, need to be more than just mothers.*

What I need is a sign.

*You haven't said much.*

Come on, come on.

*I've done all the talking.*

Please.

*I'd like to hear what you think.*

When it happens, there is no warning, no prelude, no split second of indecision. The fledgling tilts its head, opens fresh wings, and soars.

*Rachel?*

'I quit.'

## **Time Moves, People Grow**

Laura Barker

The sign says to leave them for the birds. But no  
You can leave signs unheard for sure  
Your friends call them warning signs, red flags. Like the ones  
your ex partner had. In abunds  
You pick a few. Underripe is fine,  
But these soft as soup. Nearly blackberry wine.  
Inside, ahoy  
Some next fly's pride and joy.  
Legless, white, wriggling around  
You dash this fruit on the ground.  
Time moves, people grow. You can leave things for the birds you know.

## Songs of Pollen

Laura Barker

Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth

My nectar, it is like wine:

Thread microgametes to the velvet of your pouch

Trail your body up my vine.

Draw me into you

Stroke me in my chambers

Exult rejoice

Give forth my fragrance

Your throat is golden and studded with silver

You have colony collapse disorder. I won't see you past this winter



## **Things your mother tells you**

Laura Barker

Don't climb that tree, you'll give yourself a hernia (or three). Don't eat that snail trail leaf, you could get rat lungworm disease. Don't stand so close to the eucalyptus. This day is hot, you could get blisters. Don't run into that field. The white man who owns the land has a dog and he has a gun and he would not think twice about ending you.

## **In Search of Home**

Hannah Marshall

Creative Non-Fiction

I've never been more aware of my freckles than since the house came down with a flea infestation. I pay close attention to my ankles – my mind plays tricks and everything tickles and tingles. They say being in the countryside awakens the senses. My nerves have never felt more alive. The pets are itchy-scratchy sorry-for-themselves too. I take the plunge and bath the cat. We wash the bathroom at the same time, his good-natured protest is jumping out of the bath every time I reach for the soothing shampoo. Climate change has the fleas thinking this home is their place.

Escaping to the countryside after months of tiny city flat confinement, I longed to get closer to nature. This is not what I had in mind. As I wobble on one leg to inspect a suspicious fleck, I find myself thinking that these tiny pests are nature too. My contemplation lasts until I see a new speck pinging joyously to its next meal. I hop over to the soap dish and neutralise the predator, cutting short its last supper. I order insecticide, reluctantly planning a massacre while scratching my shins.

That night moths dive bomb me as I read and I realise I am a pest and intruder too, upsetting the balance with an impertinent impersonation of the moon. Tired from my busy day of itching and bathing and spraying, I sink into the half-familiar bed. As I relax into sleep, a high-pitched whine starts up. I snap on the light. This is supposed to be my place but it seems every beast here wants to eat

me. I track the tiny vampire and squash it with the crucifix of my flip flop. I never thought of my place in nature as that of a snack.

Grateful for a garden at last, I have breakfast outside. As the late summer sun warms my skin, I wonder if you can have a wild side when you need to apply factor 50 every other hour. I hobble over sharp gravel, thinking how evolution has robbed me of my survival skills in exchange for a comfort zone. I long to escape into nature but how can I roam wild and free when I feel so vulnerable?

On my daily walks the wilderness seems to take revenge for its slain flea brethren. Gravel rolls my feet from under me, nettles raise welts and brambles pierce my skin as I reach out, lured by a blackberry of temptation. The scratches add crisscross red marks to my legs, joining the flea bites like a join-the-dots puzzle.

After a while I settle into nature's night/day rhythm. The artifice of weekdays slips away and I find my own pace. On the forgotten paths the trees don't enquire where I'm from, the bugs don't care who I love. I find comfort in my insignificance. If I don't matter, my worries don't either.

Too soon the days and nights slip away and it's time to return to the city I still can't quite call home. I try to see mystery in the drizzle-mist, luring me out for an evening walk now the streets have fallen quiet. It's wild out there and something calls me. I slip my summer-wild feet into the first shoes of the season, and they simmer with containment and frustration but carry me out of my four walls and into the urban jungle that hangs between seasons. Cool air blows freedom onto my worry-soaked cheeks and lifts

dark thoughts into the deep solace of the night sky.

On my first lap I walk till my anxiety loosens its octopus hold on my ribs. As I go, I make amends for my species' tarmac-frenzied intrusions, picking snails from harm's way and placing them on pavement plant leaves. It's hard to find a nurturing nook amongst the hard surfaces and sharp corners of this city.

On the second lap, I hear a requiem for summer in the squeak of first fallen leaves. The percussion of rubbish rustles at my feet and I pity the lost harvest of crab apples, jellied to compost mulch underfoot. I trudge past the sweet dead stench of the bins, all that grows in most slab and concrete front gardens – the microscopic breakdown, spores and juices, are nature's work too, always reclaiming.

On lap three, I make way for slugs and tilt my head back to admire the false lamplight moon and how it makes the leaves glow proud with one last halo before the fall. A short walk can take a long time when the worms are out at the downpour afterparty, throwing caution to the wind as they revel in puddles. They writhe in protest at my rescue. The ever earlier darkness sends me back past the accidental flower beds, where the intrepid weeds have partied all summer, claiming concrete cracks. The uneven plod of rain plays a beat on leaves heavy with the weight of three seasons. They hold on, for now and so do I. Just.

I sigh with relief when the next day dawns bright and warm. Autumn is gentle yet with sweet dry leaf breath, claiming mornings and evenings. Slowly muting the colour palette, shifting it to warmer hues, more to her mellow taste. I'm out walking again as

the dusk and twilight spread out their cloth of sparkled stars with cloud tufted edges. Melancholy mixed with relief. Jupiter sits above the horizon and homecoming light seeps from windows like honey, warm and liquid.

When I return home to my small-flat-on-street, I clasp a hot cup of tea (fermented leaves, water) and perch by the window (melted sand) to wait for my midnight fox family to appear.

## Pieces, Yet Whole

森子 sumchi

/semʈ.tsiɿʈʈ/

I am broken / I am not broken

I despair I cannot be fixed / I am adamant that I do not need fixing

I am healing / I am hurting

Sometimes—often—two things can be true

Unstoppable force meets immovable object

We are not star-crossed lovers but frozen in eternal embrace

A slow dance

Hand in hand

Hand on shoulder

Hand on waist

Step by step

Eye to eye

I am billions of years old

Each second I am ageing while being reborn

I have many birthdays but every day holds something worth  
commemorating

A cause for dying is a cause for living

Here, beneath the earth, we rise and fall

Inhale exhale mingling with own limbs and appendages

Deep inside I am a roiling crowd

A churning chorus sung over and over and over again

In this unreachable space  
Voice echoing in a red-hot chamber  
Until an entire ensemble is crying aloud  
In celebration, in mourning  
Lungs squeezed  
To lay in womb and coffin  
Place of waking and resting  
Furnace, phoenix nesting  
I am ancient but some say I never existed at all

Multitudes contained but the humble vessel has always just been me

## **Falling is Like Climbing Because Both Leave You Breathless – A Quartet on Nature**

Bethan James

Creative Non-Fiction

### **PART 1 – AUTUMN: Mountains do not always appear as mountains.**

‘Nobody cares if people with underlying health issues catch Covid.’

After she says this to me, I am left breathless. The mug of green tea shakes in my hand. Her voice is cold as granite. She states her opinion with all the certainty of a measurable and established fact, as if it was no different from declaring: *Snowdon is 1085 metres high.*

Mountaineers are familiar with the existence of a False Summit. At the moment the ascent seems steepest, and the worst is behind you, it appears. The peak is within sight. But upon reaching it, you realise nature is deceptive. You are not there yet. The pain is going to continue and it will get worse.

‘We all have to die sometime. Disabled people should get over it,’ she adds with a shrug.

I was raised in rural Wales and I am no stranger to the ache of hills. I have chronic illness and I am no stranger to struggling for air. But the way her jagged words knock all the wind out of me is a new sensation. It’s an effort to maintain steady footing.

Psychologists identify feelings of lost hope and failure among climbers who encounter a False Summit. Its effects can even follow them off the mountain. There is no way back from something like



this but down.

The Welsh for Mount Snowdon is Yr Wyddfa. It means grave.

\*

## **PART 2 – WINTER: PYO... Pick Your Own Nature Writing Contradictions**

‘Writing is healing’

(Papercuts and cutting comments)

‘Trees offer shelter’

(Stand under an oak in a storm and you’ll be felled by lightning)

‘Roses are romantic’

(It’s the thorns not the buds that remind us we’re alive)

\*

## **PART 3 – SPRING: Violettomania**

Those paintings of Monet’s purple water lilies made waves when they were first displayed, with stuffy monocled men saying only the ‘insane’ saw violet in the water and the sky. It was later dubbed Violettomania.

But there are plums in sunsets and the violent violet of a fresh bruise in puddles. Amethysts blink in the window of my corner shop and there’s lavender waiting in the bubbles at the bottom of my teacup after washing up.

Somewhere, a water lily laughs a rich, mulberry laugh.

#### **Part 4 – SUMMER: Counting the 72 Seasons of the Year**

I leave South London for a couple of weeks to visit family in South Wales.

During my search for calm, I turn to nature by numbers. I participate in the annual butterfly count and spot four Painted Ladies in fifteen minutes. I find eight different kinds of green on a single apple tree, from absinthe to celadon and verdigris.

51,831 people die of Covid in England and Wales between 1 March and 31 July 2020.

My brain buzzes as if there's a wasp nest in my head. (I had a wasp nest behind my bedroom wall once, and it sounded like one hundred tiny cats purring behind the plaster). I tally up the word count of my work-in-progress novel. It rises and falls like the furrows of the fields around my parents' house.

I have been away too long. Uprooted. Even the soil is a different colour here. Dark chocolate. The air has a different taste. Seaweed and blossoms. I compile a list of Welsh words for nature from dad's dusty English-Cymraeg dictionary.

That dragonfly over there is *gwas y neidr*. Servant of the serpent. This lady bird is *buwch goch gota* – little red cow. The words are warm and thick as honey on my tongue. And here is a timid woodlouse curled in a ball and slate grey. *Gwrach y lludw*, which translates as witch of the ashes. I begin remembering more as my brain fog clears.

I count kindnesses that spread like dandelion heads and cruelties that multiply like mould spores. Eventually, I find calm in the palm of my hand: "The 72 Seasons" app on my phone. Based on the ancient Japanese calendar, the year is divided into twenty-four, and

then divided again, so there is a new season every five days. The subtle changes of the natural world are mapped throughout the year; *The First Peach Blossoms* melts into *The Maple and the Ivy Turn Yellow*, and so on. The app promises you will ‘feel the year progress, unhindered by dates and times.’

Perhaps there is a 73rd season that spans them all: renewal.

\*

Climbing can feel like falling. The steeper the ascent, the easier your journey feels on the way back. A natural momentum. I know this with the same certainty that Mount Snowdon is 1085 meters high. Yr Wyddfa. I will keep climbing.

## **A Mouthful of Leaves**

Daniel Grimston

Child has already forgotten what human is  
has already shed so many skins –  
crunching through leaf with mouth  
the sour fresh taste lifting, lifting:  
is already somewhere else –  
some other-where billions of years behind  
growing scales and fangs and cooling blood

Child is waiting for the car to come back,  
hiding for hours in the foliage,  
the denser parts of the garden;  
is entering into a family of things  
that houses can never contain,  
that drive or work or walk  
in other ways beyond the human skin

Child is becoming itself remembering,  
purring growling to itself before it goes back  
before it forgets  
before it sews itself up in tidy definitions –

Child is wild and wet and dripping with memory,  
at least until the car comes back...

## **Goldfinches**

Duranka Perera

Creative Non-Fiction

Even as work, life and time have conspired to divorce me from nature, my memories of goldfinches still shine bright in my heart.

The goldfinch is a thistle specialist, its sharp, slender bill designed to tease the tiniest morsel from the narrowest of crevices. Its song, a delicate descending trill accompanied by full-body shakes, is delivered as if the bird is performing a solo at its own miniature opera. Seen from afar, the golds and browns of its plumage probably register as no more remarkable than that of a house sparrow. But one look at its ruby-red face changes everything.

The goldfinch's face is the stuff of legend. It is said to have gained its colour from the blood of Christ as the bird descended to pick at his Crown of Thorns. Such religious significance made the bird the subject of numerous paintings, from Raphael to Carel Fabritius, the latter of which inspired an award-winning novel by Donna Tartt. Its beauty also made it a valuable collector's item in Victorian England. Unsurprisingly, its populations collapsed.

By the 2000s, though their numbers had recovered, they still weren't common. My encyclopaedias, and my experience, confirmed as much. Compared to the daily ubiquity of the robins and blackbirds picking insects from our lawn, the woodpigeons shuffling across the cobblestones and the blue and great tits snug in our nest-boxes, the goldfinch was conspicuous in its complete absence. To the then ten-year-old me, if I could somehow see one, it would be the equivalent

of finding a rare item in a video game, a gemstone in a quarry. For someone who had grown up on re-runs of David Attenborough, it might even have felt like touching paradise.

I started out simple, convincing my parents to help me put up peanuts and sunflower seeds from the local Sainsbury's. Unfortunately, the common birds were all too quick to stake their claim. Peanut cakes especially were dismantled within moments of hanging them up by the local hordes of starlings. It was only once serious-looking greenfinches arrived in our area that I had my 'eureka' moment. After we cleaned our feeders and refilled them from our seed sacks, the flock stayed and fledged numerous hatchlings. If new birds could settle in our garden with a little bit of help, why couldn't I attract specific birds deliberately?

I pored through the crinkled CJ Wild Bird food catalogues I'd get in the letterbox for the answer, something irresistible to any self-respecting goldfinch. I'd call the company every few days, asking about nyjer – harvested thistle seeds – and the special feeders through which it could be dispensed. For sure, I was over-excited. After all, I was in primary school and my parents weren't made of money. Nobody in my class was interested in animals, nobody in our Sri Lankan immigrant community cared about the environment. As hobbies went, this was becoming too self-indulgent, too wasteful of my time and the academia I showed potential in. It was a fact that hit home hardest when mice infiltrated our garage one night and emptied our feed down to the plastic.

But even then, one fact consoled me. I knew life came in webs, networks of multiple habitats and food sources, just like we as

humans traversed different environments like home and school, or cooked different meals for each day of the week. Goldfinches came to gardens long before nyjer seed became available, so what else could bring them there?

Playing a hunch, returning to the island of hope I'd carved for myself through my calls to the bird food company, I convinced my parents to do something else entirely. Absolutely nothing. And by that I meant, no gardening both front and back for weeks.

When it happened three months later, it must have only lasted half an hour or so.

I woke that weekend to see, unmistakably, that some of our dandelions had been stripped bare. This had been my plan: to stop anyone from pulling out weeds so that they would one day replace their petals with feathery seeds. Rushing to get my camera, I hunkered down by the living room window and peered through a gap in the curtains. I snapped the lens at anything that moved, squabbling magpies, a collared dove about to land. But sure enough, I saw them. A pair of goldfinches hopping on the grass, hoovering up the dandelion seeds with the very same greed of a squirrel fattening itself for winter. They were young, their faces only partially reddened, their first moult incomplete, but I didn't care. Months of waiting had condensed into a perfect moment, a moment where I realised what I could do for nature, and that it would count. Even after they left, I knew the feelings they had conjured in me never would.

In time, I could not maintain my relationship with the natural

world. School and community, and perhaps my own uncertainty of what I should do with this most esoteric of passions, required rigidity, progression. The ranging colours of my childhood were soon supplanted by the sterile whites of the hospital, treating patients during the most severe pandemic in generations. Daily life became divorced from nature, a matter of shielding myself and my family from the perils beyond our doors. However, despite never catching COVID-19, my mother became unwell regardless. As part of her recovery – to counteract the steroids that both treated her and ate away at her bones – we took up 5 kilometre runs through our local neighbourhood, wandering through tree-lined suburbs and along the riverside parks. It was a relief, a re-connection, feeling the outside air brush my face, hearing the fluid melodies of birdsong replace the static beeps of life support machines.

And then, on the wires above our heads, the sound of a descending trill, like the coda of a miniature opera. A glimpse of that sharp beak. That unmistakeable red face.

Still there.

After all these years.



## **Distant Relatives**

Mandi Maripise

Creative Non-Fiction

The word for tree in my mother tongue is muti. The word for traditional medicine or magical charms in my native Shona is also muti. Having a bilingual brain, I have learned that there are concepts in English my adopted language that are close cousins, that are otherwise distant relatives in Shona. I have also learned the reverse to be true. I think mostly in English these days, and this shapes my worldview.

However, my understanding of trees remains stubbornly rooted in my mother tongue. I cannot disassociate trees from healing and magic. They are synonymous to me.

Tree bark and root extracts are often used in healing ceremonies or traditional rituals that my people perform. Each harvest the elders give thanks to our ancestors for their grace and favour under nyii. You'll have to beg my pardon; I do not know the word for nyii in English. I just know it as nyii. I am not inclined to Google the English, or Latin word for nyii. This tree was not planted with translation in mind.

The nyii, a tree, a muti stands tall and proud on our family's rural homestead and fruits annually without fail. It produces small, succulent, stony fruits that are an enchanting turmeric yellow. When ripe and ready the fruits fall to the surrounding ground like hailstones. A convoy of our cousins would travel to the village for the month-long school holidays which happened to coincide with

nyii season. Privileged with being the youngest grandchildren of the clan, my cousin Tino and I would play games and stuff our faces with sun kissed fruit all day during these visits. Whilst the older grandchildren were summoned to herd cows, shuck corn, fetch water from the borehole, wash dishes or help with preparing food.

After breakfast, we linger in the smoky round hut kitchen where a conical thatched roof stands above our heads, a packed cow dung floor sits below our feet. Wood-framed walls plastered with cow dung and mud surround us. I look out of the west-facing doorway on to the dusty grounds of our ancestral home where the nyii tree catches my eye in the distance beyond rows of corn crops.

My grandfather, my sekuru perches a wooden stool next to me and tells me that under the nyii was mbuya's favourite place on our homestead. Mbuya, nursed nine children under the nyii, she also mourned three of them under the nyii. I imagine mbuya seeking refuge from the sweltering midday sun under the nyii. Nurturing new life and beaming with joy one season, heavy with grief at the turn of another. The nyii holding space for her through it all. The circle of life.

When the modern medicine, the modern muti stopped working. Sekuru accompanied mbuya from the village clinic to the homestead where she would spend her remaining days. He adds that it only seemed right that her final resting place, would be a dignified grave next to the nyii.

On the final night of this visit, we congregate in the main house where we join Sekuru as he kneels and prays to the God of Abraham for journey mercies. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the way the missionaries taught him to as a young boy.

Under the nyii Sekuru pours a libation and asks our ancestors to watch over my father and I as we travel back to the city and then make an onward journey to the airport.

A big metal bird, an unnatural thing transports my father and I to greener pastures, wetlands, and woodlands. From Harare to London where a new life begins.

## **When does a garden become a wood become a forest?**

Elsbeth Wilson

*'A folly might be defined as a useless building erected for ornament on a gentleman's estate' – Barbara Jones, Follies and Grottos, 1953*

artfully placed rocks  
folly of landscaped ruins  
careful carelessness

this was a garden  
of picnics, riches, white dresses  
of only a few

now, we are golden  
in clumps of bamboo, privet -  
all us escapees

## **Tennis Court Glade**

Elspeth Wilson

The light falls speckled, dappled like  
it only wants to power half the grass, leave  
the rest to rest in the shade of the afternoon.  
Birds rustle in the shrubs, building homes  
unseen. Insects shake the grasses where  
tennis bats used to thump in a rhythm  
now echoed by the rubbing of grass-  
hopper legs, the stomp of running  
shoes, the panting of dogs let off  
the lead. Old bits of rubble poke  
their heads through the green, tattoos  
on fresh skin, reminding the land of  
its past, of  
its uses.

## **Garden Escapee**

Elspeth Wilson

There was a privet hedge in the garden I grew  
up in that loomed, villainous, like something twisted  
from a fairy tale. It kept me safe from prying eyes,  
stray dogs, ancient cats, other children –  
but what keeps the outside out, keeps the inside in.  
Eventually, I grew tall enough to see over  
the uneven seams of fields of rapeseed, leeks,  
potatoes.

Sitting in Sydenham Hill woods, there's  
privet here too, a plant that is native to many  
continents, that thrives in a variety of  
temperatures, tying my body to that semi-suburban  
ground that grew that little girl who was so keen  
to get to the other side, and so afraid.

## **Webbed Feet**

Pippa Wildwood

Creative Non-Fiction

'I might have periods where I can't talk,' I tell Laura in the lift. 'That's fine, do what you need,' she says warmly. To do what I need is not as straightforward as that with a little understood neuro-immune disorder and a strong impulse to make polite conversation with someone I barely know; but it calms me down to say it. I'm feeling nervous. Having a new carer around me can be extremely fatiguing, bringing on paralysed days drowning in symptoms.

Outside the weather is throwing itself at us, as temperamental as a clown deciding on which chair to sit. Pouring rain, sunshine, pouring rain. Off we go to sanctuary, to sanity. This is the green time. The short time outside my room and into the living world. Today somehow I've managed to wear only red. Red blanket, red coat, red scarf and red wheelchair rain cover, which always makes me feel like a small red car, a red idiot, a red lump with a floating head.

On the street the air has that feeling of things about to tip over. The roads are busier, noisier, I pop in my ear plugs. The drinkers under the bridge call out to us:

'Make our day girls!'

'No thanks,' I say.

'Gross,' shouts Laura.

As we roll on I tell Laura about the creche of goslings in the park that I've been visiting. We talk about how birds have helped us through dark times. She tells me while her dad was dying, he became more and more interested in birds and that she believes when someone dies you catch the things they love in order to keep hold of them. It means so much to me to talk with someone who has suffered. I know it sounds strange, but it means they have this other vision. To me, that makes such a difference. I told her how sometimes in the worst of it, just managing to get out to the courtyard of the block and see one bird felt impossible, rare, and I drank in every detail, every moment, as sustenance for the long hours of pain in my little box. Note to self for the next ad; carer must have experienced at least a medium serving of grief.

When we hit the gates, I set my speed down to two. Ruskin Park, a little patch of green caught like moss in the cracks of the city. We make a beeline for the pond. On my left a cargo train rattles by. Past the tennis courts littered with balls, like bright green wildflowers. The outdoor trapeze school, a man falling through the air, kicking his legs in pendulum.

I navigate my wheelchair around cracks, holes and craters on the avenue of tender green trees with their roots chucking



up the path, threatening to steer my chair into the grass. Past the usual tired parents with prams, young children disappearing up trees, joggers, drinkers, talkers, a patient in their pyjamas with a nurse. Squirrels scatter, pestering everyone. We pass the bandstand with its crowd of empty benches facing in, keenly watching boxers practice, grunting, sound of pad against glove, laughter.

Finally, the small pond. This time it's been a week since I've seen them and when I do my heart aches a little to have missed a week of them growing. As though I've betrayed the place or it me. A week, and now long necks, long legs, twice the size as before, they come along in a line between the two parents, balancing with their tiny featherless wings outstretched as they run. They settle on the path in a puddle, undulating as their little bodies breathe together. A dumpling of goslings, I like to call them. The parent geese ever watchful and fierce stand guard hissing and ducking their necks up and down, up and down, and slapping their wings at any too close approach.

Having been coming here nearly every day for nine months, I've seen each season, each week of each season bring something to marvel at. A few weeks ago the goslings had come, nine then eight and each day I've made it here I've watched as the parents protect and nurture them. Canada geese are monogamous, most couples stay together all of their lives. Nine goslings hatching is rare as the average is five; it feels extravagant.

We watch as the parents preen themselves on a muddy bank, running their beaks down each tail feather, tugging a little then raising their heads to look around, swallow, then start over. One pulls out three feathers. In ingenious synchronicity, as the goslings grow their feathers, the adult geese lose their flight feathers for 20–40 days for their summer moult, regaining flight about the same time as the goslings begin to fly.

The goslings now have more adult colouring mixed with the brown-yellow down of childhood. It won't be long until they are fully grown. Seeing this I feel a pang of uneasiness, but also uplifted, excited. They will enter the fledgling stage any time from 6 to 9 weeks and though British Canada geese don't migrate, I wonder if soon they will fly away.

Each of my carers have told me individually that in this job they have slowed down and noticed the small changes evolving through cycles and seasons. Because I really look at things they said, so with me they do too. It's true, having been through all that I have, I now see differently, I look differently. As I emerged from my long near death, the world unfolded anew before me, alive, laughing; how exquisite! Darkness and difficulty transforming the smallest detail into miracle, the webbed feet of a goose now a wonder of the world. We laughed because we must look mad sometimes, lost in stillness, staring, 'But who is mad,' Laura said, 'us or them?'

## **Me v. Nature**

Dhruti Shah

Today is a write-off  
I spilt the milk  
My Money Plant died  
My roots have no shoots  
My Calla Lily cried  
My pear was mouldy  
A fly went in my mouth  
A spider dropped on my head  
and then it went down south...  
I got pricked by a thorn  
Then got salt in the cut  
The slugs ate my tomatoes  
Then drowned in my water butt  
The foxes were screaming...  
The flower heads were dead  
Some cat peed in the garden  
Thieving rats – well they're well fed  
They said 'nature was soothing'  
I'm telling you, it's a lie  
It's unruly, wild, unkempt  
From earth all the way to the sky  
Now I might not be 'a natural'  
And sometimes I'm tempted by the bin  
but what nature doesn't know

Is that I've got pretty tough skin...  
But today is a write-off  
And I'm feeling pretty raw  
So for now, I have to accept  
That nature won this turf war

## **Squelch**

Jess Glaisher

Fiction

I don't really care that you wore your good hiking boots. Nor do I care that you stepped right there, exactly on that solid looking place, to avoid what was bound to happen: a sploshy, wet, creeping down your body feeling. To me, it feels good.

The problem with you is, you don't know your shape. Mine is fluid in a way you haven't learned to be yet, and I can feel that it's shifted slightly, just over there, in that formerly solid spot, and that now there's a hole where there wasn't one before. Now in that newly created hole, there is a noise, a keening, angry noise, that you're making. It seems like you want to hurt me, your fists balled and trying to punch my body, which is just moving around under your protests. I don't know what you think you're going to achieve.

I had no intention to hurt you, or annoy you. In fact, I was just minding my business when you came along. The rain that fell earlier had stopped up my cracks and seams, joining the continents of my skin together as each valley filled with water. I went from arid desert, gasping thirst, to pleasantly wet and spongy, then soaked and covered in puddles. I'm not sure how long it took to go from one state to the other, but it doesn't really matter. I can't stop the rain from falling, and I wouldn't want to. I can't stop the rain falling any more than I could have stopped you from wearing white trousers on the day of a massive storm.

Before you got here, there were ducks splashing in the drops,

sliding down my back, laughing their raucous duck laughs. They think my slippery-slidiness is fun, and the rain meant there were no humans to get in their way.

They left when the rain cleared up, and I settled down for the day, enjoying the way I am now, and all the while knowing that this is temporary too. Tomorrow I could be back to desert, back to cracks and crevices, or I could be drowned and spread out further. I was content when you walked up, bringing the dog out with its snuffling nose and lifted legs. I bet you were hoping it wouldn't roll in the puddles, or worse. Honestly, I'm still pretty content now, even with you lying there cursing my name. There's some clay stuck on your thighs, do you know that? And it looks like that expensive waterproof jacket hasn't stopped me from seeping into your shirt. Never mind, I'll wash out.

There's really no need to swear so much, it's not going to change anything. Humans, always thinking they can change things by shouting, I have no idea why. If you were paying more attention to your surroundings and less time trying to control them, maybe you'd notice more. Like your dog rolling in that fox shit over there, for example. That's going to be fun to clean out of all that fur. I wonder how long it will take you to notice.

Oh, you've stopped swearing for a moment, to call what sounded like a name? Yes, there's the other one, stepping on me with...sandals? Well, that wasn't a good idea at all, was it? If someone in hiking boots fell over in my squelchy mass then that one's got no chance.

See, I was right. Fun to watch though. Slipped on one leg, leaving a long line on my skin before falling face first. They were still laughing at you when they fell; their smile is imprinted on

me, part of me, for now. It's all temporary, like I keep telling you. I might keep the smile though, remember it for later when it's dark and you've gone home and wiped the residue of me from your legs. And put your trousers in the wash.

The dog gets it better than you do. It's come back and wants to join in on your game. I'm guessing you've told it off a lot of times for rolling in the mud, and here you are doing exactly that. Well, of course the dog wants to join in, when you're doing it, why shouldn't it?

You think this is a fight: you versus me, and possibly also the dog who isn't really taking sides. I told you the dog understood better than you: there are no sides here. I didn't pull you down here, I didn't grab your ankle or put a puddle right where you would slip. I might keep the shoe that I got from you, though. That'd show you. It's all temporary, even fancy hiking boots. You'll have to hop home.

You'll both get up eventually, and wander off towards your car which will get covered in me as well. You'll think you've cleaned everything, but there'll always be a small part of me somewhere. Maybe in the tread of your shoe. Alright, you can have the other one back, I don't need it anyway. Careful how you pull it, mind. You might fall straight back down.

Well, you've made it back up from the floor. Look at the state of you! I'm everywhere, all over your hands and legs and back. And on your friend, all over their face and chest.

It was nice to make your acquaintance.

Here comes the rain again. Turn your face up to it, go on, just for a second. It'll feel so good.

## Garbage Day

Arden Fitzroy

The trash child of the century!  
Rough basket bastard beast, found in stony  
rubbish, branded base, base  
trouble, tribal fop of dispossession, dressed  
in fossil-burnt plastic smoke,  
no range of ocean to be a lost generation but damn

we're on our knees PhD baristas,  
charity-shop weekday fashionistas  
scrolling-doomscrolling, living only  
from one obsession to the next,

the tongue tripping down gaslit streets  
flashing all in your head, it's all in your head,  
it's—just some trash-ripened adults leaving their  
litter strewn about the centuries,  
to be collected by the model trash child,  
first of their scratched-out name:  
welcome to the dumpster,  
we steaming-livestreaming trash children  
overspilling as we look to the staring sun



## **In His Element**

Martin Milton

Fiction

The sun is just over the horizon and Nick sits on his board, the taste of salt on his lips. He is the far side of the breakers; the swell is up and the waves are firing this morning. He looks back at the beach, wondering what time his friends will make it down. He looks to the city beyond where the streetlights still twinkle, and a few cars are starting to move. Durban looks so still this early in the morning. Nick sits patiently, rising and falling, gradually floating 180 degrees, back out to sea.

It is then that his heart skips a beat, his eye drawn out to sea. What was that? A fin? 'Duh Duh, duh duh duh duh ...' he hears the movie soundtrack in his mind. Is it ... was it ... a shark? Shit. There had been warnings lately, but ... he hasn't crossed Durban's shark nets – has he? He relaxes as he sees more fins and remembers that Great Whites are not social animals – at least he thinks that's right. No this is a pod of dolphins, playful and vibrant. His spirit animal if ever there was one.

Nick is never more in his element than when out on the water. An early morning surf wakes him, sets him up for the day. There's a huge wave forming, and Nick finds the perfect position. He paddles, his strong arms perfectly in sync, pulling the water back and pushing his board forward. He hits that sweet spot, his board rises up, peaks and starts to face down the wave. He jumps up and takes control, carving into the perfectly formed wall of water,

teasing the barrel, daring it to chase him along the beach ... he's in the zone.

It is an invigorating ride and Nick wastes no time before paddling back out. He takes two more before letting himself sink back into the waters. The fins are back, and he watches them, noticing that one of the dolphins is curious, spy hopping Nick from afar.

'You watching me watching you watching me ...' Who would want to be anywhere else? Unlike many of his friends, his best mate Jack included, Nick has never been tempted to join the flood of people leaving the country – the 'brain drain' they call it. Maybe that's why, he's hardly 'brainy', not in the academic sense. And anyway, he is African and proud of it.

The sun rises further, and Nick wipes his fringe from his eyes as the dolphins start to come close. They're more than curious it seems. At first there are a couple more spy hoppers but then, out of the misty waters luminous grey shapes begin to form around him. They surround his board, zooming up his right side and down his left. They dive, leaving a trail of bubbles behind them so he can track them playing beneath him. A big one breaches high out of the water just 5 metres ahead of him, looking him in the eye as he does. It takes Nick's breath away.

Nick slips off his board, immersing himself in the water. He pushes the board away and watches the blurred shapes whizz by. He can feel their power, the water buffeting him as they pass. He hears whistles and squeaks, there's an almost indecent sense of intimacy. He is transitioning from his own world to theirs. The dolphins swim at, and around him – focused and deliberate. Nick can't help himself; he laughs out loud, smiles and feels an incredible sense of alertness.

The dolphins encourage Nick, shooting past and heading down, deep. Nick tries to follow, but he struggles, it's not just the leash that attaches him to his board, it's his breath, he can't keep up with them. He's an accomplished inhabitant of these waters, but it's their element, not his. They're constantly moving, he has to keep rising up for a breath before putting his head back down to join them. They move so fast he has to look right and left for mere glimpses, while treading water, diving, staying under longer than he normally would. Maybe he isn't exceptionally tired, just hadn't realised how much effort he has put into this experience, in trying to keep up with these perfectly evolved beings.

Eventually Nick has to rest, so pulls on his leash and throws his left arm over his board, the wax pulling at the hairs. The dolphins follow, with the most exquisite, sensuous upward spirals. Nick doesn't speak 'dolphinsese', he can't be certain, but their squeaks and calls seem friendly ... and excited. Time stands still as a wave of joy washes through him. This is sublime.

They're calling him. It's like they want to play. A group of them start to surf the waves and it feels only natural that he joins them. They're so fast and manoeuvre effortlessly. Compared to them he is slow and clunky, but he ignores this. He waves his delight as Simon and Leanne come down to the water.

The next wave is huge, the pull extreme. Can he join them? Adrenaline flowing, Nick is thrilled, it feels so precarious, yet so right. He races down the wall, following the dolphins. Euphoria.

Then, just as quickly as they appeared, the pod disappears. Nick takes his eye off the wall of water and watches the last of the fins sink below the surface. As he does, the wave closes out. He's not

prepared, and his weight is all wrong. He falls, something he has done a thousand times before. But this time his board hits exposed reef. A complete wipe-out.

In that split second everything has changed, the dolphins have moved on and after landing hard on the coral, his neck broken instantly and painlessly, so has Nick.

All that is left is for his earthly form to be retrieved by those of his own kind.

## **The Earth Beneath Her**

Qudsia Mirza

Fiction

She looked out of the window and saw that the day was brightening, a light-filled sky edged with tissues of cloud. Tobacco-coloured trees and their knot-swollen branches stood still and silent. The winter had been long and arduous, a slow, mythical progress from snow to thaw, to drizzle and deluge. Now, at last, the stir of bud and leaf. In the course of this time and the relentless pain, she felt as if she had passed through many ages, lived several lives.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the phone light up with a text. She reached for it, the ache below her ribs sharp and strong. It was Seema, checking up on her, fulfilling her daughterly duties. She sent her a thumbs up emoji. Thank God for the brevity of images, she thought, words are beyond me at the moment.

She shifted herself gingerly - small, incremental twists so that the bruised side stayed as motionless as possible. She took a painkiller and slumped back on the pillow, exhausted. Soon, she felt the pain flow out and her body loosened with the delicious rush of ease.

The light streamed in bright now, opulent in its warmth, like a soft layer of silk on her skin. She saw the clouds disappearing and Rumi's line leapt to her mind - 'This is how I would die into the love I have for you: As pieces of cloud dissolve in sunlight.' A favourite of hers because it embodied exactly how she felt when Seema was born. Such a long time ago she sighed, a year after she left Karachi to join Fazal and start her married life. Here with him,

in this drab, rain-soaked land.

She remembered the struggle of those first years and how she felt as if something had been rent open, torn from her. She missed home so much. Ammi and Abu and Juji's protective sisterliness, the chaos of Sami and Bhaiya. The steady stream of jaunty uncles, and bickering aunts, voluptuous in their misery. And all those disorderly cousins who made up the ebb and flow of home. It was only when Seema was born, and she looked down into her milky-black eyes, that she felt herself returning, regaining something she'd lost.

The last few months of her pregnancy had been hard, accompanied by a grinding, brutal winter. Each day she woke to a sky grey and overcast. Then quick snow, at first in muted whispers, then heavy and clotted. By early afternoon, the air around her was so thick and gloamy, she felt as if she was being suffocated. Icicles, beautiful and glittering but also alien and terrifying, hung heavy and low. She began to dream of a shard of ice in her body, piercing through skin, scratching at bone, tearing tendon and muscle. Navigating through her veins, it's gleaming tip pointed at the baby blithely growing inside her; she would wake with a stifled gasp.

Once, she walked slowly to the end of the garden, her pregnant bulk stretched out in front. She stood in the quiet, looking at the deep white around her, at the shrouded house, the sycamore tree frosted against the dark sky. Its branches were embalmed in snow and she noticed how the spoked twigs, so weighed down by their heavy load, trembled in the air. Her heart suddenly ached and in a moment she still can't explain to herself, she grasped one of the icicles and broke it off. Spreading out her hand, she plunged it into

her palm, calmly watching the blood pool.

After Seema was born, she began to grow things in the garden. Hours were spent churning up the peaty soil. She marvelled at its muscularity, how hard she had to struggle with its coiled innards. So unlike the red-brown earth of Sindh which was dry and dusty and slipped easily through her hands. She grew sweet onions and gnarly potatoes, purple-orange carrots, peas and spinach, bulging pods of beans. Later, she carefully tended ginger and garlic, the foundation of all her dishes. And once she had set up the greenhouse next to the sycamore tree, she expanded her repertoire to okra and fenugreek, and then to forest-green chillies that unfurled in their earthenware pots. Although they lacked the far-reaching fire of those back home, they sated the gnawing hunger in her.

By planting things in the garden, she took possession of it. The earth became knowable, hers. As she turned the soil, she began to make peace with the loss of her homeland. The rupture with the dewy Karachi air as it rolled in from the sea. With the way that the water danced and spangled under the sun. The sharp aroma of eucalyptus trees at dusk. She still longed for that vast, canopied sky that had made her feel the world was boundless, all there to explore. But now, she realised it was her uprooting that had led her to this new place. And that she had to create the earth beneath her.

Turning her head to the window, she looked out again. The sycamore tree stood much taller now, flecked with light and shade. Its leaves fluttered down, gauzy blades spiralling in the prised light. Some torn apart, some intact, like the wings of a dragonfly. All dissolving and disappearing into the blue of the sky.

## **The World Tree**

Gurnam Bubber

I am the pillar holding up the heavens  
The axis mundi  
My roots binding the worlds beneath  
My boughs gather space and time  
Embracing stars and clouds  
Earth sky dancer  
Yet I am more  
Fire and water course through my veins  
Life shoots forth on and around me  
Adorned by soft mosses and lichens strange  
Gods and goblins attend me  
I endure

My words are runes of power  
My leaves the pages turned  
My fruit is knowledge  
Bird song my mind  
I am of all things  
And all things are me  
Matter calling to matter  
I am a ladder to your deepest self  
Many realms hang as jewels on my branches  
I am the cosmos and your heart  
I have seen life after death



The great circle  
The dust of my being  
Fertile and abundant  
I am the world tree  
I am every tree.

## **On Birdsong and Bereavement**

Anita Sethi

Creative Non-Fiction

The birdsong eases my bereaved heart.

Birdsong here in the heart of London.

I can't quite identify what kind of birds they are singing so beautifully, but it doesn't seem to matter, such is the magnificence of their music.

Their song floods like a balm over the bruisedness of the day.

Their song soothes the noisiness in my head,

Seeps into the aching loss.

I'm walking to the memorial of a friend named Dawn who died so suddenly this summer aged just 34 years old.

I walk through what feels like a secret garden, an urban greenscape in London called OmVed Gardens, once a tarmacked and wounded wasteland which has been brought to life with a wildflower meadow, orchard and vegetable garden. A seed saving network in the gardens aims to collect seeds and preserve them for the future.

Today would have been Dawn's 35th birthday and some friends are gathering in these gardens to celebrate her brief yet brilliant existence. As friends share tributes, the birds gather and sing above us, and it is strange and lovely how they seem to be joining in, in this commemoration of a life lost too soon, of a life which has left such a legacy of love, defiance and hope.

Since I heard the shocking news of Dawn's death in July, it has been a struggle to breathe easily. Here in this green urban

wilderness, I breathe deeper than I have in a long time; I inhale the sweet scents of nature, and how fresh the air seems to be as it flows through my lungs. I feel startled all of a sudden at still being here at all, still alive.

I realise how much nature in the city has helped me to survive through this strange summer of a sudden bereavement.

Walking through Woodberry Wetlands nature reserve, and even the greyest and rainiest of days could not stop the sheer persistence and colours of nature from lifting the heart. The Woodberry Wetlands provide a home in Hackney of 11 hectares for wildlife, and it is gloriously free for the public to visit, having opened to the public five years ago for the first time in 200 years and includes a wonderful wildflower meadow. Located close to the Lee Valley, it is a home for migratory birds that move between here and the Lee Valley Special Protection Area with waterfowl such as pochard, shoveler, and gadwall. Wetland birds that love it here include grey heron, tufted duck, reed bunting, and I also look out for kingfisher, and other winged creatures including damselflies, dragonflies, and amphibians and bats.

I particularly relish walking by the New River Path and look out over the water thinking of the reed beds which have been organised by the London Wildlife Trust and provide increased wildlife habitat, also encouraging more reed bunting and reed warbler to breed at the site as well as additional habit for overwintering bittern, a wading bird in the heron family.

As soon as I stepped inside the Woodberry Wetlands, the noise of the city falls away – the blare of engines and the beeping of

horns and screech of roadworks. My ears and heart filling with what sounds like a miracle – the bliss and beauty of birdsong.

The Wetlands are also a delicious place, engaging all of the senses – as well as sound and sight, taste. A sign points out the blackberries, and that they are starting to ripen, that they are delightful to taste but also an important food for wildlife that may have a dependence on this great source of sugar. The sign says that we are welcome to try a few while visiting but not to pick and take them home but leave them here to nourish the wildlife.

I walk on and listen again to the music of nature. A sign reading ‘Who lives here?’, points out some of the birds: the Cetti’s warbler is resident all year round and is Britain’s loudest bird. The male sings one phrase from one post before moving on to the next. I listen out for the Reed Warbler who arrive from their winter residence in West Africa and are a summer visitor to the UK.

This summer I also have a wonderful walk through Sydenham Hill Wood which is part of the largest remaining tract of the old Great North Wood, now a mesmerising mix of old and recently established woodland and Victorian garden survivors. I am guided by a member of the London Wildlife Trust, as part of my writer-in-residence stint on Spread the Word’s This is Our Place project, and it was fantastic to have such an expert point out different facets and fascinating facts about the wood – which is home to over 200 species of trees and flowering plants including wild garlic, early dog-violet and bugle. We stop to marvel at a magnificent tree, the Cedar of Lebanon, a tree that has lived there for nearly 400 years. Also flourishing in this wood are a multitude of fungi, rare

insects, birds and elusive woodland mammals. A sign tells visitors that it is bird breeding season, and to help keep the birds safe and keep dogs at a friendly distance – if parent birds think their nest is under attack they can abandon their eggs or chicks. I reflect on the vulnerability as well as strength of nature, how we must take care of and respect it properly.

Walking along canals and by the rivers has also been a balm in the midst of bereavement; waterways flow like veins through the city, like lifeblood.

\*

I begin to walk regularly at dawn and think of Dawn and her brief, brilliant life.

The music floods through me, lyrics from Leonard Cohen and the song ‘Anthem’, about birds singing at the break of day, bidding us to start again. So many writers, artists and musicians have drawn strength from nature and transformed elements of the natural world into enduring artwork of whatever medium, this song being just one example.

I pull out my earphones and listen to the music of the natural world, even here in the city. I listen to the River Thames lapping, and to the beating of the wings of a bird.

I can feel the nights draw in as we’ve passed the Summer Solstice. I can feel the days beginning to darken earlier. Yet I hold in my heart always the hope of a new day breaking, the promise of beginning again, the beauty of birds singing at dawn.

## **I Went To The Park During Lockdown And All I Got Was This Spiritual Awakening**

Shannon Howard

Forests are far away  
and the bottom of the ocean is dark  
and glaciers are cold and they might melt under me.

So I look for you near bins on busy roads,  
and in gravel by train tracks; cracks in pavements;  
the mossy carpet I tread over tarmac.

It's a good game – wherever I seek I find.  
When my eyes follow wire, they get vines  
and webs and green shoots that turn smog filled cracks into bursts of life.

Science and sunlight,  
Chance and magic.

There are seeds flying through the city air.

I am standing on Point Hill.  
It is seven pm in the summer.  
I am alone but the park is full.  
We are all watching the sky

being shared by birds and planes  
and cranes and flies; your purple light.  
The air is sweet.

There are thousands of windows on the horizon.

Big Life.

Dark offices; bright living rooms;  
balconies strung with fairy lights.

From this great distance  
the city is an ant hill.

From this great hour  
I see it all infused –

The city we laid  
And the city you made.

## Nature – Life Intruding

Miriam Nicholson-Butcher

Creative Non-Fiction

My father's ashes are resting in a West Country woodland amongst the roots of silver birch and oak. In spring the slab of Welsh slate that marks the dates of his life nestles amongst a carpet of wildflowers, bluebells, and crocuses. It's tranquil here, but never quiet. Bugs and birds scramble and flutter from bark to branch. The ground creaks and the air shifts. In the distance the hum of a motorway. Sunlight flickers through the canopy and settles on my forehead.

My home is a fourth floor flat in South London, shared with my wife and cat. I love living in the city, love finding a sense of peace amidst the sensory overload. Here, lives lived in close proximity spill out into the streets, tangled and lively. Pigeons shelter outside my bedroom window, beaks tucked into feathers all fat and cozy. Foxes stalk the communal bins, blatant and audacious. From my balcony I can hear the estate's well-loved little playground filling my ears with the sounds of children playing, parents chatting, babies crying. Outside my block a privet hedge grown feral bursts across boundaries, the pungent scent of its white flowers is glorious. I like to reach out and pinch a fresh leaf, crunch it between my fingers with a crisp snap and scatter the pieces across the pavement like confetti.

Then –

*'Unprecedented times'* crash into our lives like a burst water pipe threatening to bring down our foundations. Tendrils of hazard tape are woven into the playgrounds railings and the gates padlocked



tight. An eerie calm settles over the gaudy play equipment like dust. The planting around the edges grows wild. The pigeons and foxes maintain their claim on the land, but I feel lost without the noise and smell of human life intruding. That silence gnaws.

My balcony becomes a sanctuary. I like to drink my early morning tea with a slight breeze across my skin, watching little puffs of marshmallow clouds sputter across the ice blue sky. I track where the shade falls, noting the moment in time that the floor becomes scorched and my eyes squint. I plant a bag of mystery bulbs and hope this act will ease my fear. I focus on tiny noises. A short sharp blast of a dustbuster. Violent. Deadly. A chair being dragged across a wooden floor, the feet of its metal legs encased in rubber. Outside above the rooftops, a plane drags air across the sky. The sound starts small and far away, a vibration at the tips of my ears before slowly expanding like a lung, then falling away to the distance. A click of a switch. The hiss and spit of water bubbling into life. Metal crashes into crockery.

Cabin fever sends me out to the streets to stretch my edges, to wander, to walk, to run, to risk my life for the joy of a posh coffee bought from a boujie cafe. I circle the city lakes and follow the rivers. Notice the water covered in bright green algae, toxic they say, yet the fish are alive and jumping, dancing about between the surface and the bed. I seek out pocket parks and patches of woodland. I lie in the grass, between the roots of silver birch and oak, take off my shoes and wiggle my toes amongst the renegade daisies and buttercups.

When the rules expand, I escape to the sea. The wind whips damp hair across my face. Salt spray coats my eyelashes. Above

me seagulls circle, hardy scavengers ever hopeful. Dregs of cider seep from rusted cans discarded at the seawall. I walk closer to the water's edge, take off my shoes and let my feet sink into the wet sand, let the tide flow back and forth and over and under. Pebbles crunch and shift beneath my toes. I look up and out to the horizon far in the distance, to the boundary where the sea blurs into the sky. A murmuration of starlings sweep and swirl, their collective bodies paint shapes across a kaleidoscope of colour and light. The water beneath is dark, the deepest blues and purples. A smattering of silver ripples across the surface.

The seasons rotate and the walls of my flat change; concrete, brick, and glass move and sway with the turning weather. Light streams through the windows, heating up the living room like a greenhouse, contracting internal door frames so the catch of each handle slips slightly out of alignment. I stand on the balcony. Late summer sun sweeps across our block warming the tops of my shoulders. The gates of the playground are now unlocked. I can hear the squeak of the swings, the whoosh of the roundabout. The little boy next door calls down to a friend below. A neighbour, an older man with wild hair, leans against the railings smoking a rollie. His cat, a tubby fluffball we call Pudding, lolls on the tarmac. My planters are flourishing with life. Bees and butterflies circle the lavender and rosemary, ants crawl between the bricks. Those mystery bulbs planted last year have bloomed into lilies, their stalks so tall it's as though they are trying to hug the stars. White petals fall to the ground. In the distance the rattle of a train.

Sunlight flickers through it all and settles on my forehead.

## **Komorebi – As dappled sun shines through**

Christina Mary Ann Gestra

Touching the ground, just here. ...and there,  
Shadows and light, shimmering, dancing and playing amongst themselves  
on the surface of the earth  
...just like the children of the park

Amidst this freshness & energy, there's a sense of time and years gone by,  
present, just from your sheer sense of scale & grand stature

You exist in a different time frame, and live your life at your own different pace

We see you as still, fixed and unchanging,  
yet your growth rings slowly & calmly plough on through  
proving us otherwise...

Highlighting, that the least we can do.... is just respect and thank you!

## **She/Her/Animal**

Mo

Fiction

### Hawk

She was away from her usual habitat when she found it.

I thought you were coming tomorrow.

I am the first, she thought, apart from the animals but they didn't seem to have found it either. It was well hidden; well, partly hidden and partly camouflaged, its leaves were similar to the nettles. Perforated edges like Mum's old Sewing scissors. No more sewing, not for a long time; she hated it, she said. She used to make us all sorts when we were growing up.

Needs Must.

Who's taken my pinking shears?

You bloody children.

Similar but not the same. They were a brighter green; vermillion, and broader, rounder, their perforations less sharp. But then the fruit; scarlet. Opposites on the colour wheel. That was nature for you, so well balanced, she thought.

Why are they bright like this to attract the birds and also shielding themselves? I mean they need to spread their seeds, she said.

I'm not doing that anymore. I don't have to, her mother said.

No. That's finished now.

Seed propagation, one of the few things she remembered from school biology lessons: F for fail - mistaking a vertebra for a tooth didn't help. She smiled as she remembered Jeevan's surreptitious

glances and sliding her paper around to accommodate her. Two teeth.

I don't know. It's not something I've thought about before.

I'll look on my phone

It was that flash of red that had caught her eye; a sharp sting to the back of the hand when she reached for her first one. The offerings were tiny not like the shop-bought version. But they had the same pitted texture – like un-emerged stubble – with fine hairs sprouting across their surface and that same sharp, fruity smell; but more earthy, more green. (Later she would juxtapose them – wild and cultivated – and present them to her mother in a bowl at 'pudding time', sprinkled with sugar, to amuse her, but mostly to amuse herself).

'To prevent "overbrowsing" by bigger animals e.g. deer and rabbits that damage the leaves and don't spread the seeds as well as mice and birds,' she read.

Oh. What are they?

### Crab.

Have you anything for me? She said, on her next visit whilst gently lifting the nettles with a dead branch. Then: ow!

Side of the ankle, wrist, shin, she stung herself every time she returned. The visits were getting more frequent, the stays longer. She was beginning to wonder where home was.

Once picked she would bring back the bounty in her lightly cupped hand.

*Drops of sunlight.*

And in those short journeys she found a tranquillity now rare to her.

*Only swimming in the sea. And it's been so long.*

But the spell was always broken by her one-handed fumble for

her keys and the noisy shove-open of her mother's front door.

I was wondering where you were.

### Squirrel

One for you. One for me.

Are they raspberries?

And these ones on the windowsill to ripen. No. You've got raspberries in your garden.

But the next day they were always half shrivelled.

It's because they're so small.

Good logic! But they still melt in your mouth. And have that lovely tang. Mmmmmmmmmmm.

Yes, There not as tart as I expected.

In the evenings, when she settled down to watch television – only comedy she couldn't face the news anymore – she felt the lingering tingle of the nettle stings on her skin and relished the reminder of her special place.

### Fox/Meerkat

Remember to pretend you're looking at something else. Or do your shoelace up if anyone comes.

I haven't got laces. You know I can't bend.

She retrieved her branch.

Actually just keep watch.

You always were mean.

She began prodding at the nettles.

No you are. I'm generous like Dad was. Anyway I shared them

with you. And that friend of yours.

It's so ridiculous I just can't think of her...

Maggie. (Even though she moaned about the "foreign" food in the supermarket. Put one foot out of the smoke and...)

Sorry?

Nothing. Look here's one.

Do you want me to hold your bag?

No.

It's like those big birds.

The Jackdaws? What about them?

I put something out for them the other day and then later when I was getting the washing in I saw one had found it. Then another turned up and the first one moved away and started pecking somewhere else. So the second one pecked in the same place for a bit then lost interest and flew off; then it went back to it.

What?

I told you. It went back to what I put out.

She crouched down for closer inspection.

There must be more. Oh. Crafty. They can remember faces. Corvids.

Sorry?

Crows, they can remember faces - for a couple of years apparently. Wheatochocs though, probably not very good for them.

Really? Maybe that's why they always appear when I go out. They seem to like it. Anyway what would *I* want with *them* at my age... or those spaghetti circles.

I know. Here's one.

Not to mention I'd have probably kicked the bucket if I'd have

just waited ... they took so long to arrive.

And they both laughed.

But their insides. (Probably not that lemon cake I gave them either). Last two.

Want me to carry them?

No.

The next day she saw the remaining contents of the cereal in the food waste bin.

### Mouse/Bat/Wolf.

August and she visited her plant before her mother, someone had cleared the edge of the path flattening part of it in the process. No more fruit anyway. End of season.

Bending, she touched a leaf.

Thank you *Fragaria Vesca*, see you next year.

Two hands free now and the wood had shrunk; she crept into the house then flew up to the attic room.

I was expecting you yesterday.

The words followed her up the stairs.

She knelt on the bed and let out a long howl.



## Cherry Blossom in the Park

Farhana Khalique

Creative Non-Fiction

May 2020:

It had been like breathing, not something I ever really thought about. I'd go there with a book, or cut through it on my way home from the shops, or shuffle around it now and then in a half-hearted attempt at a run.

Even though I'm still allowed to be here now, albeit it as part of a daily window of exercise, it feels... illicit. I don't have to be here, I have a garden. But it's so good to be back. Smelling the damp zing of the cut grass, feeling the mud beneath my trainers, seeing the pigeons noisily not practising their social distancing.

Actually, it looks pretty much the same as before. Just with fewer people and prams and bikes.

Except one thing.

As I turn towards the tennis courts and the duck pond, the row of trees that line the main path seem to have blossomed overnight. Endless arms of puffy pink and white petals, backlit by a sun-bleached sky.

Then I remember.

The list I saw in *Time Out*. Or rather, *Time Out In*. 'The best places to see cherry blossom in London'. The visit I'd planned to make over Easter, but didn't.

The visit I'd planned to make with my best friend, the one who lives on the other side of the city. The one who'd hated the Tube

in the first place, now God only knows when we'll risk getting on it again to meet up. The one I'd hiked through Box Hill with, the one I'd gone white water rafting in Lee Valley with, the one I'd Gone Ape with in Trent Park. The one I'm too worried to share the corners of a picnic blanket with now.

I stare up at these trees, with their web of branches and leaves, their bark as rough as promises. These blossoms are already starting to fall. Lazily, but as surely as the clock ticks and the sun sinks.

I should be heading home.

Before I leave, I bend down and scoop up a handful of white petals, velvety and feather-light. Then I let them fall through my fingers, like a fading memory.

## **Made in England**

Jaya Gajparia

Creative Non-Fiction

Out of reach, there is an entire world I desire. Beyond the discoloured mélange of orange and brown, bricks form neatly lined terraces. I waste countless hours staring out my bedroom window at the bloated cobble-stone alleyway, its assault-course of weeds and dandelions poking through the gaps. The light impenetrable through the unwanted splash of constant grey. But, back then, that world was hidden and out of reach, ‘too dangerous’ they said, for brown girls to frolic and play.

The winter months pass slowly and painfully like ageing joints longing for youth, filled with nothing and nothingness. Even my brain decides it’s not worth etching in memory. I am but another shade of brown littered across the town. Sometimes those white boys set their rottweilers on us. My cousins and I leg it as fast as we can down the street to a fenced front garden. We never get caught. We learn to run fast.

I long for the fragrant scent of spring to arrive, once more teasing and tickling the wanderlust I keep hidden and buried deep. It begins with a spontaneous phone call from a relative, always on a sunny Sunday morning, an invitation to head over to the other side of the hills. In sonic speed ready to leave, with lunch prepped, packed, and placed neatly in the back of the car boot. I still never go anywhere without a homemade tiffin and a jar filled with shiny golden syrup-soaked chunks of preserved mangos delicately laced

in the sacred aroma of home.

The glorious sunshine streams into the car, fused with it the intoxicating whiff of the placid, fertile semi-rural landscape. I wonder if anyone notices the palpable yet quiet excitement oozing out of me... I carefully and precisely examine the narrowing of lanes, the beautiful stone houses, and fancy bars and restaurants as we pass by in our plain metallic pastel-green family car.

Within an hour the car wheels crunch over the pebble-stone car park in search of an empty spot. I swing open the car doors, letting the freshest of fresh oxygen into what feels like suffocated lungs. The air feels buoyant. Every visit, every time, I am awestruck by the boundless basin of fresh water, nature's meeting point in the valleys. And finally, that noise allayed, a moment of solace during the hour-long communion walking around the reservoir, where shades of brown are just shades of brown.

## **flutterbys and fingerhats**

LiLi K. Bright

### **a crack in the canopy**

gaps between thought.

air clears,  
breathes;  
stalks death,  
freely.

without [the] words  
the song sings itself,  
perhaps.

sight jumps solitary, across  
the flight of damsels, dragons.

space  
between  
words.

space  
between breaths.

space  
between space between  
space.

**fluttering peace**

LiLi K. Bright

There's a yawn in the woods,  
Where butterflies tousle,  
Venom-tipped spears salute.

Arsenal, disarm.  
Take courage.

Tucked away,  
Sweet bed  
Undisturbed,  
Signifies antiquity.

Take care.

Living exhibit  
Unharmd remains.

**fairy gloves**

LiLi K. Bright

purple fingers,  
hollowed marrow,  
quirks, dry,  
sucked points,  
peer above  
long grass.

\* \* \*

networks of tubes  
across time,  
pump signals.

dead men's bells  
open, but,  
tell not.

\* \* \*

gauntlets  
                    silky,  
offcuts  
                    velvet,

whisper · struck · ruffled,

in

progress

parts

strewn.

thimble · house · poison,

witches and elves

dispute their claims,

under

stories

spinning

yarns.



## **Survival**

Wenzday Jones

Creative Non-Fiction

Welcome world... seen through windows to the Outside... to my soul via my senses... those windows to Inside. Whether inner or outer, well-worn pathways to connection, containment, expansion.

I didn't do much walking while shielding. Even less than normal. Instead, I journeyed along sun rays of soothing sunsets and sunrises, counting non-numbered days by cycles of birdsong, their chirrups so innocent and joyful, cocky, singing to each other, to themselves, to the world. Outside. Just being. Like me. Inside. Being – just.

Dozens of spider sacs all along my bathroom ceiling, mistakenly massacred, forever disturbed by frantic scurrying of tiny babies down the wall and abseiling all around me, stopping my vacuum in its tracks, splitting the bag to try to save thousands of legs – one of my few forages Outside. Later, my guilt preventing me from opening the stifling window a large spider drew its web across... less air for me in my sun trap flat at the top of a house at the top of a hill, but home – and life – for the web's creator. My serendipitous delight (that never fades, just sustains), on discovering a friend's giant spider web drawn across their front door across town – they also taking great care to allow. Sadly, one day, the postman in his hurry did not, caught up in his frantic work and the giant web, picking wisps and corpses out of hair and clothes with the wild thrashing of an insect's death throes. Their neighbour's post with

additional... invisible lines weaving across town.

Enjoying melodic rain drops and wind howling accompaniment, tinkling all around, not realising the cost was no water for hours, housebound. Not realising the havoc wreaked. On a hottest day and night and day. Horrified by cars tossed emphatically and carelessly around by 'freak' hurricanes. In London. Rows of neighbours flooded, their homes and possessions destroyed, still displaced months later. Streets still stinking of damp, ruined lives still piled high on pavements. I used to love the rain – and I still do – I'm just scared of it now when it starts. I don't know how it will end anymore... temporary puddles children delightfully splash in as they troop the pavements en masse twice weekly, the chorus of their voices reminding me of lives yet to be lived and that I am still alive. But in the mornings and the evenings the birds still sing. For now.

Delight in trees growing their leaves, thick foliage like a horizontal carpet, the sadness of their dropping replaced by the wider expanse of sky to marvel upon. Solace always brought knowing that many insects will find their hibernation and reproductive homes in the decaying piles, to hatch and spring with life anew (if they haven't been eaten) in a few months. The bats flitting around in the dusk, their erratic patterns explained as they swoop onto unseen prey, maybe the horsefly that chomped my ankle one night causing huge wheezing and breathing problems for already oxygen depleted lungs, those internal trees still slowly recovering, still coughing up covid jelly lumps of goo months later, marvelling at nature's wicked mutations, grateful and disturbed at how long it has taken for my

body to learn how to break it down. Realising why and how quickly it can kill. Realising how lucky I am, although my oxygen levels still as erratic as the bats sweeping.

I woke up one morning disturbed and perturbed, my bones and body aching and heavy. Unsurprised to open curtains to snow flurries, sprinkling a fluffy landscape, settling to snow covered tops by lunchtime, surprised by the sun fiercely melting to be replaced by t-shirt weather by tea-time. My body struggles to keep up, to catch up, so I did not feel the heat until the next morning, only for it to be snowing again.

Winter passed in a haze, interspersed with friends having to isolate for ten days due to covid, in awe of how I was managing shielding. There was no secret, no kudos to be had – I just did.

Moon-bathing, transfixed by yellows and whites and hues of the moon. Marking majestic movement across the skies, its seamless yet ever changing shape to disappear and be renewed. Outside and far, far away. Moonbeams another virtual pathway, connection to the universal highways, zooming in another way – the earthly way too easily migraine inducing.

Now, a spider has made its mansion among a bunch of dried and decaying flowers I almost discarded, quite at home scampering along multi-floored translucent corridors, sometimes perching on the white crystal head next to the vase, no longer beats a quick retreat when I peer in. The flowers? A present from the garden of the Web Owners.

Dear web and weave of life. I could not have survived shielding without your forever changing gentle stoicism. I could not have endured the myriad of slow and rapid deteriorations due to acute and chronic conditions, so much struggling healing ripped from me by lockdowns, collapsing systems both inside and out.

So now I savour each memory with sweetness and gratitude, each moment with depth and authenticity, seeking connection that is so plentiful, that I only found in such extreme isolation, in the quiet beauty of the mundane.

I hear talk of 'going back to normal' or even a 'new normal', but that will never be the case for me. Not anymore. Not even nearly. There has been too much change, and I have discovered there is too much wonderment to be found in every little thing to ever be bored or lonely. I just have to breathe and be still and see. No, nothing will ever be normal again. And for that, I am grateful.

I wonder how much of this world will survive as life continues to disappear – much never to return. With the sun and the moon to oversee and overshadow its ever-changing nature of Things. The only constant we have.

For now.

## Mama

Poonam Madar

there go the autumn trees  
stripped of all their assumed necessities.  
bewildered by the sudden change,  
and the overwhelming breeze.

*Mama*, was this place ever ours?

summer can be most deceiving  
with everything in full bloom.  
no one suspects the light disappearing  
or being abandoned by the sun and the moon.

still, we belong. *Mama* has us believe.

the dark, now quickly settled  
is temporary, yet never-ending.  
but the light shows up again.  
*Mama* says it has always been there.

seek deep within.

## **Small World**

Aparna Sivasankar

Creative Non-Fiction

The grass is the tallest thing in my world. I am hiding from the sun, lying under an oak close to the edges of its canopy. The tall, thin grass looked more welcoming here. This is not the short, thick, prickly grass of a manicured lawn. Here, the soil doesn't encourage the growth of lush turf and the scraggy blades are left to their own devices, spared the ignominy of a mower.

On the ground, nestled amongst the grass, my perspective changes.

There is a breeze blowing, strong and insistent, setting everything about me in motion. Sound amplifies and diminishes. The leaves of the oak quieten, and the susurrations of the thirsty grass around me becomes louder; crackling, rustling and murmuring in the wind. The grass softens around and under me. It gentles the parched soil, smoothening the bumps and ridges of the roots. It feels more substantial, cosy enough for a doze. There is a faint smell of dampness in the soil, one I can only sense this close to the source. It has the fresh smell of crushed leaves and soil free of rot. Above, it is too hot, and the air feels too dry. But down here I am cool, comfortable and carefree.

Nearness magnifies and multiplies. I am surrounded by a luxurious curtain of green, bronze and gold. Seed heads shimmer, drifting in and out of focus, screening me from the rest of the world. Everything beyond the screen is out of focus, edges blur and

the colours pale. Without conscious thought, I keep my eyes away from the oak and the sky above me. With my head turned to the left, oaks and beeches in the distance seem almost toy-like. Little pieces of Lego, shaped into the approximation of trees.

I cannot see the path a few feet away, but I can see the fuzzy outline of a runner dutifully pumping their arms and moving down the slope. My perspective warps, distance increases, speed decreases. The grass takes on the proportion of a hedgerow. They look almost comical in their slowness, running on the other side of my reedy hedge.

My field of vision simultaneously broadens and narrows. I turn my head and see a dandelion waving in the wind behind me. I need a few seconds to identify it, upside-down, luminous and magnificent as it is. It fills the sky and shrinks the hill behind it. I imagine dandelions ten feet tall growing on hills, blowing apart in storms. I would love to see that, I think, and realise I'm smiling.

My respite will end when I get up. A few brief moments of vertigo, and my perspective will shift once again. The grass will shrink and the trees will expand. The dandelion will once again become an ephemeral and minuscule tenant on the hill. Bronze and gold will dull to brown and yellow. The seed heads will slow down, runners will speed up. The sound of the grass will fade. The curtain will lift, and expose me to the world.

## **Koru**

Martha Aroha

New life comes smellingly after rain.  
Between toes, a swollen belly of soil holds the cloudburst.  
I have always found comfort in the squishy parts of women.  
My mother has absorbed poison from others, still  
lets me sink into the sponge of her.  
In a square metre of wilderness  
she exposes her stomach.  
I am feet-first in the afterbirth. My God,  
I have friends who contain entire ecosystems –  
let me be a canopy of ferns!  
Surely, now is my time to uncurl, to  
nurture ugly weeds in the shade.  
New life comes smellingly after rain.  
Drunk on zinc, soil  
spits out fiddleheads  
like fists.



## About the Contributors

**Anita Goveas** is British-Asian, London-based, and fuelled by strong coffee and paneer jalfrezi. She was first published in the 2016 London Short Story Prize anthology, most recently in *Little Fiction* and *Gone Lawn*. She's on the editorial team at *Flashback Fiction*, an editor at *Mythic Picnic's* Twitter zine, and tweets erratically [@coffeeandpaneer](https://twitter.com/coffeeandpaneer). Her debut flash collection, *Families and other natural disasters*, is available from Reflex Press, and links to her stories are at [www.coffeeandpaneer.wordpress.com](http://www.coffeeandpaneer.wordpress.com)

**Anita Sethi** was born in Manchester, UK. Her new book, *I Belong Here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* is the first in her nature writing trilogy, published by Bloomsbury. *I Belong Here* has been described as 'a thing of beauty' by the *Sunday Times*, 'a memoir of rare power' by *The Guardian*, and as 'a magnificent and redemptive achievement' by *The Bookseller*. Her writing has also appeared in anthologies including *Common People*, *The Wild Isles* and *Women on Nature*. She has written for *The Guardian*, *Observer*, *i*, *Sunday Times*, *Telegraph*, *Vogue*, *BBC Wildlife* and appeared on various BBC radio programmes. Her career highlights include going birdwatching with Margaret Atwood in the UK's oldest nature reserve. Twitter: [@anitasethi](https://twitter.com/anitasethi) [@ibelong\\_here](https://twitter.com/ibelong_here)

**Aparna Sivasankar** was born and raised in India and has lived in London since 2017. She spends her free time reading, writing, walking, and volunteering in nature conservation (and she usually

does all of those things on Hampstead Heath). Aparna is currently on a quest to find the perfect bench for watching the winter sunrise. Instagram: [@lovetheheath](https://www.instagram.com/lovetheheath)

**Arden Fitzroy** is a writer-poet, actor, and producer, who believes in experimentation and blurring the boundaries of genre, gender and art forms. Their writing has appeared with the Royal Society of Literature, Untitled Writing, Stone of Madness Press, UCL Culture, Rejection Letters, and more. They were shortlisted for the London Writers Award in Poetry 2018, the Creative Future Writers' Awards 2020, the VAULT FIVE 2021, and the Streetcake Experimental Writing Prize 2021, longlisted for the 2020 Primadonna Prize, and have opened for Saul Williams on the Roundhouse Main Stage. They are Lead Producer on the RISE Collective's Amplify Podcast. Twitter: [@ArdenFitzroy](https://twitter.com/ArdenFitzroy) | Instagram: [@ArdenFitzroy](https://www.instagram.com/ArdenFitzroy) | [www.ardenfitzroy.com](http://www.ardenfitzroy.com)

**Becky Bone** began writing in the form of stand-up and sketch comedy and is an accomplished improviser and interactive theatre performer. She has recently completed a BA in Creative Writing and English at Birkbeck, and in 2019 reached the semi-finals of UniSlam with the Birkbeck team. Her poetry appears in Streetcake and Culture Matters.

**Bethan James** is a London-based freelance writer who grew up in Wales. In 2021, she received an Arts Council England grant to take time out from book publicity to complete her debut novel. Her writing is published by Royal Society of Literature, Litro and Ellipsis, amongst others. Bethan was recently selected for

the United Nations' global feminist fairytale retellings anthology, *Awake Not Sleeping*. Other achievements include: winner in Neil Gaiman & Word Factory's Fables for a Modern World competition; shortlisted for the Bristol Short Story Prize; received New Writing South's New Buds Award. Twitter: [@thebethanjames](https://twitter.com/thebethanjames)

**Caroline Gardiner** was one of the Spread the Word 2019 London Writers Awardees. Her poetry has been selected by Roger McGough to feature on London buses. She has co-written a radio play for BBC World Service, dramatised short stories for an audiobook, published a YA novelette, and created immersive games for the Natural History Museum. Recently, she was shortlisted to create a new sitcom for Dave/UK TV. She previously worked as a filmmaker, with credits for Channel 4 and Al Gore's Current TV. Her films have been acquired by Tate Modern and MOMA New York.

**Christina Mary Ann Gestra** is a landscape architect, part-time spatial design tutor and multi-disciplinary artist working across a full range of mediums including photography, painting, installations, film, ceramics and crafts. Inspired by the passing of time, ideas of place and spatial layers, nature and beauty, and subtle observations from life, she always seeks to create thought-provoking yet beautiful work. Building upon her skills and experience, in recent years she has been establishing an initiative called '*if trees could tell stories...*' a fresh approach to looking at an area's past, present and potential futures envisaged through the eyes of the area's mature trees, seeing them as silent witnesses to change. Examples of her work can be seen at: [www.artseg.com](http://www.artseg.com) | [www.iftreescouldtelltellstories.com](http://www.iftreescouldtelltellstories.com)

**Cristina Reynoso** (she/her) An intersectional activist for various causes, such as feminism, antiracism and antispeciesism, who expresses through the written word. She came back to London to join family last year after spending the previous three years in Mexico, her home country, where she started a children's books publishing project to help put new local authors in the spotlight. She isn't wholly new to London life: she followed a Master's programme in Publishing at the University of the Arts between 2015 and 2017; nevertheless, the city never ceases to amaze her. Instagram: [@herbivorekitty](#)

**Daniel Grimston** is a poet from rural Sussex, based in London. He is an actor, director and workshop facilitator, as well as being co-artistic director of the Founding Fall theatre company. He was a member of the Thistle Young Poets, put together by The Poetry Society, and has recently completed Apples and Snakes' Writer's Room, run by Rachel Long. Daniel has work that has previously appeared in *Hope and Monsters*, *A Thistle Young Poets Zine*, and the fashion magazine *BOYSBYGIRLS*.

**Dhruvi Shah** is an award-winning journalist with a long career at the BBC and in local papers behind her. She's now a freelance wordsmith and 'ideas factory' for hire. Her debut *Bear Markets and Beyond: A Bestiary of Business Terms* won Short Business Book of the Year at the 2021 Business Book Awards. Her short story 'Homeward Bound' featured in the 2018 Carers UK anthology *Keeping Well, Keeping Connected*. She has several international fellowships. More recently she's been gaining qualifications in understanding nature-

based solutions. She lives in west London with a family who keep her rooted. [www.dhrutishah.com](http://www.dhrutishah.com)

**Dionne Williams** is a mental health professional and has been writing and performing poetry for over 15 years now. She conducts poetry therapy for women of colour to empower their mental health. She is a massive enthusiast for nature especially plants and wanted to combine her two main passions together to create her first nature writing piece that you are reading in this book. Instagram: [@dionnewilliams\\_coach](https://www.instagram.com/dionnewilliams_coach)

**Duranka Perera** is a surgical trainee with a lifelong love of the natural world. He was recently shortlisted for the Merky Books New Writers' Prize and has had short fiction and poetry published online and in anthologies. He seeks to marry these varying interests together as he pursues his research interests in sustainability in healthcare. Instagram: [@adoctorwrites](https://www.instagram.com/adoctorwrites) | [www.durankaperera.com](http://www.durankaperera.com)

**Elizabeth Uter** is an award-winning poet, winning the Poem for Slough Competition 2018 in 2 categories: the 19's + and was overall competition winner ([www.bringyourownfuture.net/poetry-competition](http://www.bringyourownfuture.net/poetry-competition)). She's taught poetry workshops for Farrago Poetry, read her work at the Queen's Park Literary Festival, 2019 and her poetry is published in: Gitanjali and Beyond 2021 Issues 5 & 6, 2020 Writing from Inlandia, Bakehouse Bites Online Magazine, 2020/21 & Bakehouse Bites – D&G Arts Festival 2021; Bewildering Poems Anthology with The Willesden Junction Poets for Brent Council, 2020, *Bollocks To Brexit* Poetry Anthology, *Reach* and *Sarasvati* magazines, 2019.

**Ella King** is a writer living in London. She attended Faber Academy, came 3rd in the Aurora Prize for Short Fiction 2019 and won the Blue Pencil Agency Pitch Prize 2019. Her debut novel, *BAD FRUIT*, will be published in 2022 by HarperFiction in the UK and Astra House in the US. Instagram: [@therealellaking](https://www.instagram.com/therealellaking) | Twitter: [@therealellaking](https://twitter.com/therealellaking)

**Elsbeth Wilson** is a writer and poet who is interested in how our identity impacts our relationship with nature, and how we can write about nature from the perspective of the everyday and the domestic. She has been shortlisted for Canongate's Nan Shepherd prize and Penguin's Write Now Editorial programme, and is currently working on her first book about nature, trauma and recovery. Her work frequently asks questions of how we live in our bodies and how we make them homes and hopes to widen the possible answers to those questions.

**Emily Gaywood-James** was born in Birmingham in 1991. She studied Modern Foreign Languages at the University of Leeds and spent time living and working in France, Spain, Denmark and the USA before settling in North-West London. She lives with her wife and their dog, a spirited spoodle that Emily can often be found walking on Hampstead Heath. She is currently working on her first novel. [www.emilygaywoodjames.wixsite.com/writer](http://www.emilygaywoodjames.wixsite.com/writer)

**Farhana Khalique** is a writer, voiceover artist and teacher from south-west London. Her writing is forthcoming or has appeared in *100 Voices*, *Where We Find Ourselves*, *Litro*, the *National Flash Fiction Day Anthology 2021*, the *Leicester Writes Short Story Prize Anthology 2020*, *The*

*Brown Anthology, Reflex, Lighthouse, Popsot, The Good Journal* and more. Farhana has been shortlisted for The Asian Writer Short Story Prize, and she has won a Word Factory Apprentice Award. She is also the editor of Desi Reads and a submissions editor at *SmokeLong Quarterly*. Twitter: [@HanaKhalique](https://twitter.com/HanaKhalique) | [www.farhanakhalique.com](http://www.farhanakhalique.com)

**Gurnam Bubber** was a longlisted author in the Urban Tree festival writing competition 2021 and he wrote the winning submission for Feeling it! An online anthology of nature writing ultra-short pieces. He's a storyteller for Trees for Cities and a member of Out on the Page, he increasingly likes to dabble his toes in poetry.

**Hannah Marshall** grew up between many places, usually with a menagerie of rescued animals in tow. When she was little, her family moved to rural France, where she learnt to love the countryside and this has stayed with her ever since. Until recently, she would mostly write in her head but during lockdown she finally started putting pen to paper to capture the small joys to be found in the overlooked places where nature meets the city. She lives in London with her best friend (but sadly without a cat) and can be found daydreaming in the park, reading or watching local wildlife.

**Jackee Holder** is a well-seasoned walker of London streets, parks and green spaces with over 10,000 walking hours under her belt. She is a custodian of trees gathering stories and narratives on paper and through the spoken word to keep memories of our urban woods and forests alive. Jackee is an author, coach and coach supervisor working in leadership and organisational development.

**Jaya Gajparia** is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Researcher, Writer and Charity Trustee from London. Her work focuses on issues of gender, race, and environmental justice. She is a keen advocate of systems thinking and embedding sustainability into learning and practice. Passionate about the transformative power of storytelling, she documents the lived experiences of women and girls in her podcast ‘This is women of colour’, [www.anchor.fm/thisiswomenofcolour](http://www.anchor.fm/thisiswomenofcolour). Twitter: [@jayagaj](https://twitter.com/jayagaj) | Instagram: [jaya\\_gaj](https://www.instagram.com/jaya_gaj)

**Jess Glaisher** is a queer, disabled writer living in London. Her writing focusses on queer lives, speculative futures, re-tellings, and, more recently, weird fiction. Her debut novel *Dear Lina* was published in 2020 by Audible and has been called ‘a queer dystopia for our turbulent times.’ Her work has appeared in the *For Books’ Sake* anthology (Re)Sisters and in *Novelty Magazine*, *Severine Lit*, *The Tiny Narrative*, *The Reluctant Spoonie* and on *Dear Damsels*. Instagram: [@jessglaisher\\_writer](https://www.instagram.com/jessglaisher_writer) | [www.jgrenaisancewoman.com](http://www.jgrenaisancewoman.com)

**Kia Watt** lives in London and has an interest in trees, word etymologies and history. In ‘Songs of the Trees’ she explores her fascination with the order, complexity and beauty of nature from an autistic perspective. She has always enjoyed writing and explains: ‘It’s difficult to express myself verbally as there’s often a gulf between what I want to say and my spoken words; writing gives me that time and space I need.’ She has written for adults and children, and this is her first published work.



**Laura Barker** is a writer, artist, and facilitator. She runs an LGBT black writing group in London. Her work has appeared in Apparition Lit, midnight & indigo, and The Other Stories. She has guest edited for Apparition Lit, and her YA novel Picnics was shortlisted for the Faber Andlyn (FAB) Prize.

**LiLi Kathleen Bright** is a writer, workshop leader and coach, specialising in asynchronous, remote communication. With a deep love of learning, LiLi is studying German and is an amateur dendrologist. Currently creating a collection of tree poetry and short stories, they were selected for The Future is Back writing award in 2019 and have performed at Gays the Word.

**Linda / Linh / Ling Tieu** was born in the UK > her parents were born in Vietnam > and 3 of her grandparents were born in China. She can't decide whether her favourite food is a roast, pho or xiaolongbao. She writes silly-witty-visual short stories and uses humour to highlight the absurdity of everyday life, believing that narratives from people of colour can be joyful and doesn't always have to be based on trauma. She lives in London / her day job is in fashion marketing / and she's active in underrepresented community groups including GirlDreameer + ESEA Sisters.

**Mandi Maripise** was raised in a culture which has a rich tradition of oral storytelling. She views sharing stories orally or in writing as a way to cultivate connections with fellow humans and the world we inhabit. Mandi's favourite creative medium is spoken word poetry which lends itself closely to the oral tradition which she

grew up immersed in. When time outside of the 9-5 allows, she can be found writing, sharing and listening to stories relating to but not limited to; feminism, migration, belonging, nature, grief and love in all its manifestations.

**Martha Aroha** is from the UK and Aotearoa (New Zealand). She first wrote poems as a teenager on the Arvon schools programme. She now writes to 'touch grass' when the world is its most lurid and shout-y. She boasts an impressive cocktail of neurodevelopmental and auditory processing disorders. This is her first publication. Instagram: [@shutupmartha](#) | Twitter: [@marthawhatever](#)

Like the protagonist in his story ('In His Element'), **Martin Milton** spent his adolescence in South Africa where he loved the wilderness and its inhabitants. He later spent time living in New York before returning to the UK, settling down and establishing his career as a psychologist. Martin lives in SW London with his husband and two fur babies and while he enjoys city living, he makes sure he gets out into London's green spaces on a regular basis, and when he can, further afield.

**Miriam Nicholson-Butcher** loved to write stories as a child, but it wasn't until she was diagnosed with dyslexia as an adult, and accessed support, that she gained the confidence to share her work with others. She is interested in the interaction between people, nature, and the city; themes that resonated during Lockdown. Miriam coordinates events and projects for non-profits, while exploring her creativity through studies in art & design. She loves

walking by the river, wandering South London parks, and sitting on her balcony with a good book and a cup of tea.

**Mo** is a writer and artist. Originally from the East Midlands she has lived in South London for many years. She writes plays, poetry and prose often with darkly comic and other-worldly elements. She has been published by Leaf books, shortlisted for the Asham Award, longlisted for the British Theatre Challenge and had a short play performed by Sixteenfeet Productions. She is soon to be published in *Ambit* magazine. She has an enduring love of nature. She sees nature and humanity as inseparable and fears for our future. She is currently working on conveying this creatively.

**Pia Dawson** is half Malay and half English and enjoys writing that explores in-betweens, the way places shape people and people shape places, family, identity and food. She is Content Lead at Parkinson's UK and a volunteer speaker for the Faith & Belief Forum. She lives in Finsbury Park, London.

**Pippa Wildwood** is a London-based writer, theatre maker, artist, and facilitator. She has worked with Living Words, Tate and Clowns Without Borders, amongst others. She has been writing since she can remember. Her experience of disability and chronic illness has informed her life and work in unexpected ways. It has not, thankfully, crushed the silliness out of her. Nature has always been a source of recuperation and wonder, even more so in recent years. She also enjoys puzzles, games and wishing she had a dog.

**Poonam Madar** is a writer and sociologist. She earned her PhD in applied social studies from the University of Warwick, and her areas of specialisation include visual methodologies, qualitative research and the sociology of emotions. Poonam's research interests include the use of arts based methods to explore themes of identity, culture, difference, and belonging. Through her writing, Poonam especially likes to explore the essentials of human existence: love, emotion, personal growth and mortality. She is the owner and founder of Working Warrior. [www.working-warrior.com](http://www.working-warrior.com)

**Qudsia Mirza** is based in London and in her writing explores questions of migration, identity and temporality. She has been published in *The Good Journal* (2019) and the London Library anthology, *New Voices Rise* (2020). She was one of the winners of the London Library's Emerging Writers' Programme (2019), and a runner up in the Taking Flight playwriting competition (2018).

**Rosaleen Lynch**, an Irish youth and community worker and writer in the East End of London with words in some lovely places can be. Twitter: [@quotes\\_52](https://twitter.com/@quotes_52) | [www.52Quotes.blogspot.com](http://www.52Quotes.blogspot.com)

**Shannon Howard** is a writer based in South East London interested in fossils, ghost stories and ecology. She writes poetry and fiction and is currently working on a collection of short stories.

**Steph Morris** is a poet, artist, translator, gardener and cyclist based in London, born in Sheffield and raised in the midlands. His poems have been seen in various magazines and anthologies and in London

gardens with the Poetry School's Mixed Borders residency scheme. His poetry pamphlet *Please don't trample us; we are trying to grow!* is published by Fair Acre Press. He is currently developing a concrete poetry practice with support from the Arts Council's DYCP fund. Twitter: [@herr\\_morris](https://twitter.com/herr_morris) | [www.steph-morris.com](http://www.steph-morris.com)

**森子 sumchi** /sem˩.tsi˩.ɪ˩/ is a Chinese-British writer, voice actor, and earnest animal befriender based in South East London. Born and mostly raised in the UK, with some formative years spent in their mother's native Hong Kong, they've been writing for as long as they can remember. *Pieces, Yet Whole* is his first published piece. One day while procrastinating homework, he stumbled across Button Poetry's Youtube channel and lost hours listening to the likes of Franny Choi, Hieu Minh Nguyen, Ollie Schminkey, and Kai Davis. He's loved poetry ever since. Their work explores themes of belonging, diaspora, gender, mental health, and disability.

**Wenzday Jones** (she/her) lives in London and loves nature, the city, yoga, meditating – and words. Activates to raise awareness of the climate and ecological emergency and its root cause of colonialism – which does distract from her own writing. She's differently enabled. Wenzday is mostly introverted and not very active on social media but can be found on Twitter: [@WenzdayJones](https://twitter.com/WenzdayJones)

## About London Wildlife Trust

London Wildlife Trust is dedicated to protecting, conserving and enhancing the capital's wildlife and wild spaces. Our vision is of a London alive with nature, where everyone can experience and enjoy wildlife. Founded in 1981, the Trust manages 37 free-to-access nature reserves across the capital and engages with London's diverse communities through practical land management, campaigning, volunteering and education in order to give London's wildlife a voice. They work with many partners to advocate for a city richer in biodiversity and ecological resilience, through policy, planning and best practice. The Trust is one of 46 Wildlife Trusts working across the UK, with the support of over 800,000 members and 40,000 volunteers, to make local areas wilder and make nature part of life, for everyone.

 [@WildLondon](https://twitter.com/WildLondon)

 [@LondonWildlifeTrust](https://www.facebook.com/LondonWildlifeTrust)

 [@londonwildlifetrust](https://www.instagram.com/londonwildlifetrust)

 [www.wildlondon.org.uk](http://www.wildlondon.org.uk)

## About Spread the Word

Spread the Word is London's writer development agency, a charity and a National Portfolio client of Arts Council England. It is funded to help London's writers make their mark on the page, the screen and in the world, and build strategic partnerships to foster a literature ecology which reflects the cultural diversity of contemporary Britain. Spread the Word has a national and international reputation for initiating change-making research and developing programmes for writers that have equity and social justice at their heart. In 2015 it launched, *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place*. In 2020 it launched *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* by Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra van Lente, Goldsmiths, University of London, in partnership with *The Bookseller* and *Words of Colour*. Spread the Word's programmes include: the Young People's Laureate for London, the London Writers Awards, City of Stories Home, and This Is Our Place.

## Contact Us

If you'd like to find out more about one or more of the writers in this book, please email:

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This Is Our Place exists to reimagine how we live in London and reflect on our individual and collective relationship to nature and place. In partnership with London Wildlife Trust and funded by the Emergence Foundation, Spread the Word ran a series of in person and online workshops in August 2021 with five writers in residence: Anita Sethi, Elspeth Wilson, Jackee Holder, Laura Barker and LiLi K. Bright. This was followed by a call for submissions for new writing in poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction. We are delighted to share this writing with you, which not only expands on the canon of nature writing, it reflects London and the world beyond through new lenses, whilst also redefining our sense of place. We hope you enjoy reading this anthology and support these talented writers.

If you would like to find out more, or get in touch with one of the writers, please contact us.

Bobby Nayyar | Programme Manager

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