

We are a
many-bodied
singing thing

Speculative fiction
and poetry inspired
by endangered species
and the people
saving them

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Speculative fiction and poetry inspired by
endangered species and the people saving them

Back from the Brink

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For the Willow Tits, the veteran trees,
and all the Back from the Brink species –

and their futures.

Contents

Introduction	1
Anna Kisby: <i>Knothole Moss</i>	3
Jane Lovell: <i>From the Dead to the Living</i>	5
Jacob Spurrell: <i>Nest</i>	7
Sarah Westcott: <i>Dancer</i>	8
Sue Norton: <i>Over Lunch</i>	9
Catherine Kwella: <i>Planting Black Poplar Cuttings</i>	11
Carl Alexandersson: <i>Holding On</i>	12
Emily Richards: <i>Metamorphosis</i>	15
Mara Adamitz Scrupe: <i>The Tracker's Tale</i>	20
Jeremy Garnett: <i>Sitting Beneath Bats</i>	23
Russell Jones: <i>Waggledancers</i>	26
Melanie Kirk: <i>Vita-Broth</i>	27
Beth McDonough: <i>Bounding</i>	29
Peggy Bain: <i>An Incident</i>	30
Neil Elder: <i>The Day David Attenborough Died</i>	31
Christopher James: <i>Ariel and the Ash Trees</i>	33
Lottie Limb: <i>Homing</i>	34
Stephen Watt: <i>Adjust the Tuner</i>	38

Leslie Tate: <i>Moving Images</i>	39
Robert Garnham: <i>Tit</i>	41
JD Smith: <i>Squirrels of the Next Millennium</i>	47
Steve Ely: <i>If You Want Blood</i>	49
Daniel Duggan: <i>Forest Fire of Friends</i>	50
Rob Lowe: <i>Ouzel Park Log Store</i>	51
Jasmin Perry: <i>Starting Over</i>	52
Lucy H Friend: <i>The Wilderning</i>	59
Sarah Davies: <i>Birds After the Firestorm</i>	62
Sarah Davies: <i>What the Tree Has</i>	64
Luca Goaten: <i>Petrified Forest</i>	66
David Hawkins: [<i>Extracts from the Eurasian Bryophyte Society Report, the year 3121</i>]	68
Ruth Gilchrist: <i>Crow Learns the Names</i>	70
Kevan Manwaring: <i>The Rememberers</i>	72
<i>The Willow Tit Project</i>	80
Bryony Carling: <i>Poecile Montanus</i>	82
<i>Ancients of the Future</i>	83
Author biographies	85
Acknowledgements	90

Introduction

Linden Katherine McMahon (editor)

"I think hard times are coming, when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies, to other ways of being. And even imagine some real grounds for hope."

- Ursula K. Le Guin

The things that give me the most hope in this time of revelation and reckoning are on both ends of a scale of magnitude: I find hope in people imagining different futures, telling different stories and refusing to give in to the narrow visions that our dominant narratives give us. And I also find hope in people who are saving our non-human kin one by one, loving one species at a time until they're safe. Both of these things are necessary and beautiful.

Speculative fiction and poetry are one way to span this scale: the minutiae of good storytelling grounding us, combined with a commitment to the future that can offer expansive visions which make better worlds possible.

For the past two years, I have been an artist in residence with Back from the Brink: a hugely ambitious conservation project working to save England's most threatened species from extinction. Two Back from the Brink projects spoke loudly to my love of speculative fiction and poetry –

Firstly, the Willow Tit project – these little birds excavate their own nest holes in rotting deadwood, and thrive in post-industrial areas that we might consider wastelands. I wanted to think about what unexpected alliances we might have with plants and animals, and what life might spring up in places we've written off.

Secondly, Ancients of the Future is taking care of the ancient trees which become ecosystems in themselves, home to literally thousands of other beings. The young trees planted now will watch our world change as they become ancients. What might they see? And how can we protect them?

I wanted to bring the work of conservationists together with the imaginations of writers. In an open call out, I asked writers to explore how we might take care of the world around us as our ways of living change. I was hungry for ideas about how humans and non-human beings might create better relationships. And of course, the writers came through magnificently – with visions of empathy, fierceness, and imagination.

When I was selecting the pieces to include, I held a broad sense of the speculative. I looked for pieces that were future oriented – but in both big and small ways; so an instance of everyday compassion for an insect sits alongside space bees, and a moment between lovers with a companion tree makes conversation with a story about a rogue AI with a love for Willow Tits.

The other form of speculation that made its way into these pages is the kind that imagines us into the paws, claws, bark, and roots of other beings. This is another power that writing can offer in these times: to see from the point of view of creatures very different from us, offering new kinds of connection, warning, and kinship. The metamorphoses some writers offer – spanning a timeline from a present-day fox who finds herself human, to mosses in the next millennium – explore our changing relationships to nature, and imagine transformations that help us see what’s possible.

I was particularly happy to find some queer voices among the submissions. Queer folks have reinvented kinship through sheer will, creating spaces for ourselves by changing structures which excluded us. What could this power do if we expanded our ideas of kin to non-human beings? How might the hard-won reimagining of our belonging help us to find a more balanced and reciprocal place in this world?

Working with *Back from the Brink* has given me insight into the on-the-ground work that makes changing our relationships to non-human beings possible. I have been privileged to contribute some of my art and imagination to these projects, and to explore some of the things that creativity can bring to shaping the futures these creatures need. I hope this anthology inspires you to find out more, and to dream of new ways of being with the animals, plants, and fungi with whom we share the Earth.

Knothole Moss Offers Directions to the Humans

Anna Kisby

(i)

it's typical of your kind you start at
red field black field green field so high up
landscape like patterned china and tablecloths it's pleasing to you
i get it but i say turn your helicopter-mind inside-out
forget it
your desire for
an eagle eye

(ii)

it's a suggestion i'm just saying kneel
as if in pews – i know you know how to praise – or think of scrubbing
skirtings
– your kind works hard to clean – it's my turn to speak now turn to
knothole rotten bark low down
recall what you never knew even knee-high
a moss eye
listen

(iii)

we are a hushed rugby crowd a co-operative of
silent bell-ringers golden mouths calling
clappers chattering teeth
a whispered protest march or is that image too aggressive for you?

we are a many-bodied singing thing that's prettier – i know you like
pretty

(iv)

but i'm sorry to bear bad news
you'll have to listen with your eyes because it turns out
your poor imperfect ears
don't hear us our invisible glory hallelujahs are like
staying up all night in a circle around the fire talking about love
only not quite

i tried to tell you let this be a record of how i tried

From the Dead to the Living

Jane Lovell

They move as one,
gather seeds and saplings,
tubers and corms
 from the old sites,

flit like spirits along fox trails
through stands of elder,
hazel.

At the hulk of a fractured
 beech,
one poised like a dancer
angles her chisel
upwards, along the grain,
 cuts in.

 Tattle of wren,
spike-stick legs of beetle,
stubs of larvae
 drop
to the forest floor.

A shim of bark,
its surface grizzled with lichen,
phloem woven
 from birdsong,
 from leafmash,
burrowing spiralling worm
 and mycelium,
 she presses
 into the skin
of another.

After moments of silence,
the quietest movement.

Motes of leaf dust, fragments
 of last year's light,
rise from her footfall
and she is gone.

The tree spreads its wings,
sings to the sky
 its green song.

Nest

Jacob Spurrell

My first sensation was the kiss of the lichen
The talons closed themselves around my palms
Its leafy fingers explored my nose, my mouth, my ears
My parents watching proudly as two organisms became one
A tendril wiping a tear from my mother's eyes.

My armour is the cool embrace of the lichen
Amidst the fragments of breezeblocks and toasters
Climbing over the skeletons of supermarkets and salons
Fruticose and foliose probing the folds of the city
A beetle scales my leg and whirrs between the leaves.

I am fed through the straw of my lichen
Drinking the rays of the despotic sun
Rolling through the brooks and the undergrowth
Until I find a weathered sign with missing letters
And laughing fill in the spaces with mud.

Dancer

Sarah Westcott

When I become a tree where is the centre of this decision?
At the tip of each root, the tip of each branch -
my brain is millions of buds picked out against the air,

I am a shape of chemical channelings, electrical lengths,
impenetrable and porous. I bow to this:
we are gathered and flocked, I am a child forever –

I drop and redress my hair, I drop my hands and I raise them
to my mother. I remember the heart-cold and dry bands of heat
and I open my body as a cone, each fingernail fanning from its core.

Over Lunch

Sue Norton

Talk turns to woodland burials.
They'd found online a set-aside
field in which to lie unmarked
under oak saplings and ash,
holly and hazel as understorey.
When they visited, they found
young trees in rows like soldiers
corseted in plastic armour.

Instead, they bought a wildlife
plot in a Victorian cemetery, all
obelisks and angels for the Lord
Mayors and industrialists, ornate
marble greening and drowning
under ivy, bramble, sproutlings
of acorns, beechmast and ash.
Plump yews, gold as seraphim.

Then they left city life for a dream
cottage in a conservation village.
Rare-breed sheep in the churchyard
kept it neat, and they preferred it
for their final resting place. But what
to do with their overgrown plot?
Unexpectedly, we said we'd buy it.
You might not like it.
What could annoy us, lying there?
Still, you should view it.

Two bed, and a neighbour *David*,
beloved husband and father. He
had no objection. We hope to lie there
shoulder to shoulder, no worries.
Trump will have gone. And Johnson.

Our bodies will nourish the oak,
its purple hairstreaks and beard lichens,
its leafrollers, and spiders. We won't
hear the flycatcher, or the robin
balanced on the tilt of a tombstone
heaved by roots, but hope he'll keep
fluting in the face of the north wind,
and maybe at dusk, noctule bats
will fly from old woodpecker holes
to start moth-hunting, while thickets of ash
breathe oxygen from tombs.

Planting Black Poplar Cuttings

Catherine Kwell

The improbability of it intrigues,
though maybe not so much if you stop,

and think that we are here at all,
with boots planted,
spinning in addling revolution, settled
in the riparian mud,
the sulphurous bubbles and a breath of early leaves.

The bank is mapped with long feet, little feet,
herons, rats and the pearly sheen
of oily algae going about their glistening business,
anointers of the sucking mud
that holds its offerings closest,
filling the nose of the Bronze Age sacrifice,
cradling the dropwort
to weep by the water.

All we offer now
are slender limbs, torn from the warming air
and set, branches askew,
almost comically confused
in a world at right-angles.
A strange, topsy-turvy birth.

These will be the last daughters of mothers
drying to monuments to a time of lush floodplains.
Their many-knuckled limbs
reach out for the future

to a land that will claim its ebbs
and flows and idols again,

to a river that will once again have its rain.

Holding on

Carl Alexandersson

“Take my hand”

he says

and up we climb

*

It's not that I'm not
an outdoor person,

per se –

but my uni friends call me

a city boy

even though

I'm from a small town

and I have yet to correct them

*

We climb up

the ancient tree

and I am reminded

of just how long ago

humans evolved from apes

of just how long ago

I last climbed a tree

“Hold on”

he says

as if I wasn't already

holding on for dear life

to these branches

his hand

this

life

*

See, nowadays
I know very little
about nature
when I was younger
my grandparents
would take me mushroom picking
hiking, fishing –
we would row
to the island in the middle of the lake
where we would pretend to be
explorers
all the while
noting which bird it was that sung
and I listened
with wonder
then
but that was ages ago
now

*

We reach a solid branch
wide and sturdy enough for us
both
and we sit on the moss
with our eyes
closed
and just listen –

“I will love you
for as long as this tree stands”
he says
at last
which is another way of saying
forever
these days
and I don't know what to say
to that

*

Once,
after the storm
my grandparents
took me out to this forest
to show me
the fallen trees
and the vast holes their roots
left behind –
I remember realising
that if I ever fell into one of them
I would never be able to climb
back up
on my own

*

Together
on this sturdy branch
we hold on
he and I
to each other
to this ancient tree
which sprouted
so long ago
which sprouted
not knowing it would
one day
become ancient
not knowing it would
one day
hold two boys in love –
holding on
for dear
life.

Metamorphosis

Emily Richards

When I ceased to be a fox and became a woman, I was not surprised. Surprise is when a badger lurks behind the dustbin in King's Cross; when a mouse snatches your chicken bone from under your nose: it's unlikely, it's wrong, and thus, it's surprising. Surprising is a cat that barks like a dog or a dog that stalks away from you delicately like a cat. Surprise can only come upon you in a situation you think you know.

But I was an animal. I didn't read fairy tales. I didn't dream of being anything but what I was. I lived in my skin and my fur and my teeth, I bit and gnawed what I could get and I was always hungry. When I became a woman, it was like changing from a cub to a vixen; just another stage of myself. First I had my russet coat, my slinky, sinuous, spiky tail; then a soft skin, white and pink and red, tender as a cub's paw, apt to become painful in the wind or the sun, the air like a rasping tongue on my teats. But there are no cubs, human or fox, to lick me now, or for me to lick. A hush surrounds me. The noises of the city – the scratch of rats, the soft breath of a pigeon, the scrape-scape-scape of beetles in wood – are silent now. I sift the world like I've seen men sift sand on a building site, but I see it through glass, remote, silent, unnaturally full of human beings.

How it came about, I can't tell you. Not because I don't remember, but because I've no words for it. When we wake in the morning and have grown an inch, do we have words for how the growing felt? But I can tell you instead what I saw, smelt, sensed after it happened. A sense of time has come to me now, with my human form, and this has its advantages. I know when a meal will occur, I know when there will be food. Not knowing when you'll eat again induces panic; and those who suffer from this panic, human or animal, those who've learned the cunning to steal what they need, are known by more fortunate humans as vermin. But for me, *vermin* means the snap, crackle and pop of a rat's bones or a pigeon's claws, the feathers I spit out, the organs I chew up. It's what I eat.

I mean, what I ate.

A woman can't eat these things; especially a woman in the middle of London, a woman working in the place I work, in the *Museum*, as I now know it's called; those pleasures are forbidden. The rich, smooth meat we get for dinner here seems bland by comparison, though there's no denying that I (ha!) wolf it up quicker than any of those around me. Some look at me askance; they don't know how *I've* looked at *them*, back in the days when I hid in the bushes waiting for them to drop their sandwich or casually throw away a leg of chicken, despising their carelessness, amazed at their lack of joy in the face of plenty. Their lack of joy in general, to be honest; even these dinners don't seem to come naturally to them; but then nothing does. They're a sorry lot, on the whole.

One human, out of them all, has excited my attention. Another female (at least, I think so. Humans seem to worry a good deal about what's male, what's female. As a fox, I want to tell them; it's not the words that count, it's the desire.) She's handsome, with abundant black fur, I mean hair, tucked up enticingly into the nape of her neck, and I expected the male humans to be intrigued, to follow her scent as unerringly as I would track a mouse. But instead she's always alone, wandering the corridors or off to the park like me, and from what I hear, she's one of those who says they care about *nature*, whatever *that* is. I never spoke to her before today; or tonight, rather.

The moon hung heavy over the square and the air hung even heavier with rain about to fall. It was hot, and I felt a longing I couldn't name; a kind of grief for myself, a feeling I'd never known in my fox-life. I was walking uncomfortably down the street, my heels clacking on the stone, thinking (not for the first time) that there must be a reason why human females wear such painful, peculiar things. Then I saw her. I stopped instantly, moved into the shadow of a tree. It was a lime, deep-scented, and the smell hurt me as if the tree had taken my grief and turned it into a flower. I heard the silence, behind the noise of the traffic, the cries of London, all these humans moving as uncontrolledly and thoughtlessly as – well, as humans. I've never seen anything else move like they do. They often compare themselves to ants, but for me, there's more sense of purpose in a single ant than in the whole of the human population of London.

But a sense of purpose was coming off *her* like the scent of a day-old cub. A longing reflecting my own resonated in the air between us; my paws tingled with it. I held still, waiting, looking through the damp green darkness into the brightness of those London lights that let nothing sleep. It was the road where the stone lions sit outside the entrance to the museum, and I wondered, once again, what they're for. They're not real; they can't snarl, they couldn't tear an intruder to pieces. Yet there they sit, lumps of stone, cold and hard; no love or hate in them.

But to my surprise, she stopped just there, at one of the stone lions that wasn't a lion. She leant against it heavily, as if she were exhausted; she stroked the stone ear, lowered her head to the stone flanks; alone and lost in her humanness, like they all are. They know so little of the world; an animal isn't just what you see, I wanted to say; it's the smell, the fur, the swing of a tail, the grip of teeth! But for her, it seemed a comfort. I could see her body going soft and vulnerable, and I stiffened in fear on her behalf. Humans never seem to know when they're making themselves into prey. So I settled back into the shadows, to watch; it's my nature.

Then, I crept closer.

Reprehensible, perhaps; why get nearer to them, if you don't have to? It was curiosity; curiosity, and something else. I could sense her distress as strongly as if it were my own, as if the invisible wall that separated me from my lost world of all that was alive and real, had somehow melted and softened. So I crept; but then remembering what I was, I walked. But I'd forgotten about my shoes, those stupid heels. I knew they were good for nothing, and now they were worse than nothing. They gave me away. Instantly her body went stiff, her face rigid. She'd seen me.

So now I had to speak to her. Wrong, perhaps, but this creature in front of me was wounded, and the urge, the *need*, to comfort pushed through my new body all the way to my lungs, my throat, my tongue.

“Are you all right?” Oh, those four little words! Humans love them; not that they listen to the answer. But I did. I listened fiercely. You could say that my ears quivered.

“Oh –” She hesitated. “Yes, of course, I’m fine.”

You would have smiled, embarrassed, and walked away. *I* did not. I watched, my eyes fixing more and more tightly onto hers, until she looked away. Rather than moving back, like you would have done, I moved closer; *hunting down*, you might say, the object of my curiosity. I felt a delicious sense of my own audacity; to come so close to a human! She closed her eyes, and I could see the tears at the creases of her eyelids. I was tempted to put out my tongue and lick them, but of course I didn’t. It would have been too strange; who knows what it would have done to me? So instead, I put out a paw – a hand – and stroked her sleeve. I felt the electric tingle that passes from creature to creature; I jumped back in fear. I retreated, then moved forward, stroked her hand this time. If I’d been a man, she would have been running with her mobile phone, shouting for help. But being a woman, I saw, confers privilege as well as pain. The privilege of intimacy.

She opened her eyes, she pulled her russet coat around her, her black heels shining in the dead lamps of the city. She looked at me.

I waited.

“I must be...I don’t know! I don’t know what I am!” she said. “I feel so alone. I want to be with them. No,” she stopped for a minute, then went on, “I want to *be* them.” She looked at the lion. “I hate being human. I always have. I want to be one of them, one of the...Why am I even *telling* you this?”

This is not the sort of conversation foxes have. I didn’t know what to say.

She struggled up to her feet, looked out over my shoulder.

“Look,” she said.

I turned around. A fox! My kin, my own, my beautiful! He was moving, purposefully, carefully, down towards the bushes I had emerged from. Would he smell me? Oh, would he? A burst of longing, so intense I nearly ran towards him; then a sudden shock, a horror of loss. I couldn’t smell him! I stared until he’d gone, until he’d slunk into the shadows where I

longed to be. Then I looked back at her, and what I saw caused my fur to stiffen, my ears to go back on my head and my lips to draw back from my teeth. My claws vibrated in their sockets, and I gripped tight to the ground. The electricity that just that moment had passed between us fizzed and trembled, warning me: *beware*. For what I saw in her face was that self-same longing I had just experienced. She wanted the fox. But she was not a fox. She was human.

And as her eyes came back to mine, I saw her longing change to a fear mirroring my own.

“I don’t want to be human,” she whispered. “I want to be one of *them*.”

“*Them?*”

A faint growl rumbled in my body. Anger crawled across my skin.

She took a step back, crossed her arms around her body, began to shake. Her green eyes were luminous, huge.

“*You,*” she whispered.

And as she says it, I feel my humanness recede, withdraw, leave my body and retreat into a tiniest part of my mind. *We’re not the same!* I want to say. But I can’t speak any more; I’m shrinking, but growing too, into myself, and as I look down at my four red paws and feel the rush of energy through my tail and hear the click of my claws on the pavement, I feel something else. To paraphrase something I once heard: to lose one’s nature once might be a tragedy. But to lose it twice seems suddenly like the utmost carelessness. And now, all at once, as I run down the wet road to the safety of the dark bushes and the fox whose scent is now calling me like my own mother, I suddenly understand the human I’ve left behind. I understand them all, I understand everything. Their homelessness. Their anger. Their sadness. Their terrible desires. And their love.

The Tracker's Tale

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you.

- Gnostic Gospel of Thomas

only say a name for the mammal's
trace for amplitude say *noiseless* or *sound* ordinary
blessings/ say the compass's
periphery: oath on oath spine on spine the young born
hairless & blind

at arm's-length
wind-shorn or sylvan say a word for *habit*
or *instinct* full possessors of clouds & sky & sun
& in footprints indistinct

in limbered fields or decipherable after the squall
in spill in darkness in saltwater
patterns made before the light
before miracles & simples emollients & concoctions

say a name
one each
for *badger* for *skunk* & *rabbit*
for hare's progress
crossing tundra flats

or holed-up in the crawl space under the floorboards

say as many words
as you can think of
for snow/ glint of river

returning to winter
tell the tracker's tale/ a linguist's
lesson in any proper parlance
you choose

snowdrifts are *fingers* or *penitents'*
spikes say
signing in hands: my thighs my calves my piedmont
powerful toes/ muscled to tour
to trek & prowl prepared
for the long haul
in forest scour & varnished blight/ unsheltered/ say a name

one each

for *coyote bear & bobcat*
suicides forced off the cliff by the documentary
camera crew count them up/ scats we've collected
identified by riddled contents of stomachs
& intestines that spring's

unfolding in the pipeline & the clear cut/ forced
exodus: coyote black bear & bobcat & within
our moorings mice ribs
in the barn owls' droppings
cottontail tuft in the coy-dog dung

make sense in words of corporeal warnings describe
the front vestigial anteriorly bi-lobed
toe diagnostic of a wild cat print

or a single Siberian swan sailing in
settling on a lake one foot tucked
atop its back/ palliate/ the other paddling manic

Sitting Beneath Bats

Jeremy Garnett

For the 60th time, I ask myself what I'm doing here in the depths of a cave in Wales, and for the 60th time, I look at my IE - my Inner Eye - and watch the time and payment tick over. I'm so used to getting paid by the millicent that pounds feel unreal. I'm here for the pay, and there's no cacheing way I'd be here otherwise. I sink back into the cushion of the float and do a 360° scan for the cache of it. I'm in a *cave*, like no cave I've ever liv'd. Not that I've ever actually been in a cave before, but I've liv'd a whole cached load of vids, and a cave in a vid is pretty much defined by roof spikes, floor spikes, and lots of pretty wall colours.

This cave's different. It stinks, even inside my air-con bubble, and I wish I'd closed it before I floated anywhere near the entrance. The ground is covered in this stuff my IE tells me is guano, but that's just a fancy name for stuff that makes me very thankful I never have to touch the ground.

My IE, reacting to my subconscious, tells me the real rock floor is at least 12 metres down. I shudder, wishing I could block my nose, but that would decrease my pay, so instead I take a long sip of Hyper, delighting in the liquid kick of amphetamine. It's a mix designed to both enhance and separate my senses, and the rate of pay in my IE jumps in response. I've never seen that before, but then I've never done an actual physical research gig either. I mean, I'm pretty much being paid to sit, to see, even to smell, but it's a far cry from being paid simply for my computational power.

My mate M&y hooked it up for me after I tweaked her tribute percentile in Destiny, so she'd level up quicker. She'd been hunting for affiliates for ages, but I'm the first to take her up on it, cause it's an actual physical job.

Well, mine isn't a real physical job like *hers*, cause I'm paid to sit, though I still had to get dressed, talk face-to-face, and travel before I could sit. First time I've ever had to do that. Clothes are weird. M&y actually has to stand, and walk around, and stuff. She's still paid to watch, cause that's what her job is. Mine too, really, but standing's such a chore! Have to pay me a cachefull to get me upright.

So, the way M&y tells it, she's been paid to watch traffic, to watch people cook, and even to watch the scientists that built the latest asteroid peeling

drone. Not to watch the craft drone, apparently, but to watch the scientists as they put it through its paces.

When I asked if she had proof you could peel asteroids, she said the memory had been redacted, so she couldn't live it with me. I'm not sure I'd want to lose bits of my memory, but the payout looked wired.

Anyhow, this position came up and M&y sent it my way. Said she'd have taken it, but was too busy watching grass grow. I thought she was joking, but the vid she sent in reply is the most boring minute I've ever lived. Ever!

I sent in my app with M&y's tag, and sooner than I expected these chiropterologists – or so my IE says – wanted to meet in person. Now, from M&y I knew I'd have to travel – but to actually meet people face-to-face? So aged! I didn't think that happened anymore. Weird.

I got clothes printed, and for the first time ever got dressed for work. Then I had to travel clear across the world to meet them. Luckily, so few people travel now that I was able to sell my live feed and even get sponsors for the flight. I've got a really good feed because my parents coded me with best genes on the market - senses, computational power, even mega memory. I use some, sure, but I never had much use for the feed. Apparently, if I ever want to travel, I'll be set for life, but it's not my thing. *Way* too much movement.

I got the shock of my life when I met the scientists. They weren't *connected* at all. Oh, a couple had mods for better eyesight or hearing, and one even had a cyber-tongue, but I couldn't live with them at all.

Apparently, they thought I was really weird, too. After staring at me for ages, one finally said he'd never seen anyone so pale. It didn't really make sense to me. I've got SAsian parents, and I clearly had more melanin in my skin than a couple of them. To prove I could watch, and sit, they ran me through a couple of tests, at which point I almost told them to cache the whole thing, but the tick of actual dollars was enough to keep my attention.

Finally, they accepted my ability to sit, and I gave them access to my feed, which really sealed the deal. Then they told me about the project, about the need to know how many bats there were, and their roosting habits. I didn't give a flap – ha ha, bats flap, get it. But M&y had told me that the

employers always thought that what they were doing was the most important thing in the world, so I kept quiet. I wondered how she had managed to fake an interest in grass growing.

I must have been convincing, cause I got the job.

Now, as I sit, with 80% of my mind taken up by producing and transmitting my feed, I wonder at the eccentricities of scientists. I'm being payed to watch, so an actual physical computer can count and analyse the interactions of these Noctule Bats. The thing is, its daytime now, and they're all asleep above me, and I only have my standard air-con bubble between me and becoming a part of the floor!

I can see all these tiny little mites on the floor and it occurs to me that the bat people didn't purchase full rights to my feed. Maybe there's an entomologist I can on-sell to. Just so long as none of those mites actually touch me. Ugh. Next time I get a break, I'm definitely buying a reinforced bubble and a more powerful anti-grav mod. At least now I'll be able to afford them.

On my IE, the time and my payment tick over, forestalling my 61st question.

Waggledancers

Russell Jones

Who knew how the apple was made?
We decrypted rumours, white whiskers
of truth from the textbooks of the day.
Some things were certain: we'd no orchards,
no farms, no vineyards or everglades, just buzzing
recollections from kaput holotapes.
So we placed our faith in technology,
trusted the data. We built solar wings, hives
of Nanoreplica Apis to seek and recover.

Now they swarm space. We hope they fly safe
in their waggledance through distant galaxies.
We're the workers, tracking signals we don't know
the tail-end of. We need a cache, a golden seed
of DNA to name our saviour. We've no gods anymore,
but we pray the bees will return, save us from our self
made endless drift, our fruitless catastrophe.

Vita-Broth

Melanie Kirk

Sally dragged her spoon around her bowl of thin, beige broth. Little suspicious chunks of protein floated in the centre of the bowl. She did her best to fish them out, but whenever her spoon made contact they dissolved into little pieces.

“Don’t play with your food!” her mother snapped from across the table.

“I don’t like it.”

“Well, you know it’s all there is,” said her mother. “Besides, Vita-broth is full of goodness and essential nutrients to help you to grow big and strong for the good of the corporation.” Her voice had taken on a strange ethereal quality as she quoted the slogan they heard a hundred times a day.

“They would say that though, wouldn’t they?” Sally muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, mother.” She forced down a few spoons of the tasteless broth, imagining in her mind it was a creamy vichyssoise like she’d read about in her history books, or a sumptuous gravy with which she might drench a Sunday roast. She’d seen pictures of roast potatoes in an old cookery book she’d found in her nan’s attic — she liked to imagine how they’d taste in her mouth, the crunchy fatty outer coating melting on her tongue, followed by the soft fluffy interior.

She brought the spoon to her mouth and her face contorted.

“Don’t forget your EnergX, Sal.”

Sally picked up the chalky white pill – a concentrated source of calories that would keep her going the entire day, enabling her to work more efficiently, with less time needed for meals. She crushed the pill with the back of her spoon and dissolved it in the broth, then downed the entire thing in one go. Her mother disapproved – the corporation recommended taking the EnergX before meals with water to aid digestion, but Sally found that mixing it with her broth made it slightly more palatable, even if it did mean she had a stomach ache afterwards.

“Can I go now mum?”

“Alright, Sal,” she said. “I’ll see you later.”

Sally rushed upstairs to grab her schoolbag and books. With a quick glance at the door to check her mum was busy downstairs, she crossed the room. She didn’t have long before she had to get to school, but she wasn’t going to leave before checking on her most prized possession.

With a grunt, she opened the window, stiff from years of disuse.

Dangling beneath her window ledge, suspended in a tin she’d scavenged from the dumpster behind their building was a small plant. A mere three inches tall, it was a fragile thing but it had a fragrance that made her think of sunny beaches and lush hillsides. Not that she’d ever been to a sunny beach or a lush hillside, but it was how she imagined they’d smell.

She’d found the seedling behind the playground at school and had instinctively known it was something rare and precious that needed to be protected. So she’d dug it up and kept it in her pocket all day until she went home, and given it a new home in an old Vita-broth tin. It had taken days of pouring over her great granddad’s old gardening books – the ones that had survived the purge – to deduce it was a baby tomato she’d rescued.

How it had come to be there she’d never know. She imagined there must still be some plants growing in the wild lands, so she could only conclude that the seed had been carried into the city by a bird. However it had come to be there, she was glad she’d been the one to find it. It was her secret, her own private Eden in the city of steel and concrete where nothing green ever grew.

She took her water bottle and dripped a few precious drops into the pot.

“There you go,” she said to the plant. “That’s all I can spare for you today I’m afraid, so make it last. You’ve got a very important job to do — you’re going to grow big and strong and make lots of tasty tomatoes that I’m going to give to mummy and everybody at school. Then nobody will ever have to eat horrid EnergX or Vita-broth ever again.”

She slid down the window and smiled to herself.

“You and me, little plant, we’re going to change the world.”

Bounding

Beth McDonough

You know those long-shanked fences?
Ribs caging dunes?
Attempts to keep out walkers led by dogs.

Ready sun and salt-bleached,
their line-up at the beach's seaward side
struggles up through brand new banks.

Our place to hang towels
for after winter swims is swallowed,
almost lost.

Round by the road, that same barrier rises
from receding gums. Coast's toothy erosion,
bared at cold winds and boy racer fumes.

Last night's new moon curated this beach,
collated seaweeds, plastics and reeds,
began to strand unlikely trees,

where wagtails animate small gaps.
Maybe that bobbing shape ahead isn't a seal.
But even this vast tide has missed its dunes.

Not thwarted though, by knock-kneed sticks.
One hundred ambitious plants,
unknown five years ago, grow fast.

I plan my own small fists
full of blackthorn pips, flick sloe harvest hopes
far into fenced-off futures.

An Incident

Peggy Bain

Peace in the kitchen
when through the window
a cloud of buzzy legs and arms comes
Panic descends, we flounder in a tea towel massacre
screams of laughter mixed with steam and the smell of singed toast
When a boy from our corridor quietly puts his hands around the creature
containing all the noise, capturing the chaos and
in silence we watch him
climb up on a chair and
tip the tiny beast from a window

The Day David Attenborough Died

Neil Elder

The news appeared online mid-morning,
catalyst for change, and like fire or flood
it spread across the office. We sat
dazed at our desks, searching
for words or ways of understanding.
After an hour or more of silence
we left our workstations,
making sure to turn off all the lights.

Days later I heard that in almost every school
across the land classrooms emptied
when teachers broke the news,
and the kids held hands in circles rippling with tears.
Factories halted production; mushrooms
and strawberries were left to go round
and round on belts, plastic punnets stood empty.
And pilots quit their cockpits, refused to fly again;
that was the start of the Heathrow Nature Reserve.

By noon all cars had been abandoned,
most have been left to rust
where they stood; strange totems from the past.
And as I walked the six miles home
I passed people who needed to talk
or share their thoughts; some just needed a hug.

And on that night, it's said,
fireflies across the globe turned out their lights,
while howler monkeys howled for hours
and in the Congo gorillas sat and reminisced.

That day has turned into a decade.
We still dream of his voice
echoing across the blue planet.

Ariel and the Ash Trees

Christopher James

They woke me from a dream,
summoned me from my downy bed
of fern and bracken, inside a cloven tree.
I brushed away the leaves; tested my wings.
*Free us, they said, from the poison
that travels on the wind, the spores
that choke the lungs of England.
Bargain, spirit, for the life of our Ash.*

In emerald light, I watched their faces,
as pale and drawn as midwinter
*Have I not done thee service enough?
Where is Prospero now the Ash trees die?*
They led me to a glade and showed me
branches studded with pearls.
I called for the leaf-witherers; the demons
and wood weevils. *Show yourselves.*

One stepped from its charmed nook,
in black robes and golden wings.
*Fair spirit, it said, they do not care for thee.
These men have spent their dowry.*
Heeding no call except from the trees,
I cupped a breeze and blew between
thumbs until it became a cacophony that
tore through the wood and swept it clean.

Homing

Lottie Limb

Zee zee zee zee zee. A call so high it seemed to meet us on the cusp of human hearing. A puff of a thing singing *here I am here I am*, one more step and I'll shiver into flight. Quavering, far beyond the letter Q in her clarity, beyond R in her understanding of the cycles (to turn soft deadwood to a hole of life), with a cap like an ace of spades circling back to one. zee zee zee zee Zee.

Pause. End of the line. Back to this scrubland, then, between my childhood home and an A road. When we left and still needed to drive along this road, my brother (backseat R) and I (frontseat L) would feel the pull of nostalgia, of hopeless homing, of hopeless-knowing that every movement is a statement, turn our heads to look across the land – eyes darting between sparse thicket, past a long-abandoned sheep hut with a tree poking through its roof – for a second's fill of that familiar mirage. My mum (frontseat R) looked at the road.

This is where I trample now, feeling out the ground, around old fields and quarried lakes, keeping a safe distance from the house. Though the closest stop for a cup of tea, I feel one look inside would floor me, and flatten a part of my dreaming life.

I've come to record the sound of Willow Tits. The advertising firm I work for in London like to involve themselves in socially conscious campaigns; a lick of green paint, a morning-dewed banner to hang at the top of their website, stemming the flow of confectionary and drink work like camera-startled beavers. Anyway, I was glad to get out. Like being driven in the car all those years ago, a strange compulsion had turned me back here, where I knew Willow Tits to be.

Zee zee zee precedes blur of Tit: two of them fill the air. An audience of one human and many more – once the sounds in my recorder reached train stations across the country. We'd trialled this with a Skylark in Edinburgh Waverley last month. I'd stood for a while with a couple of

keen young volunteers from the bird charity as the lark's song played into the roof glazing. I felt tired, not from their chirpy calls and explanations to passersby, but by the blunt-stone sound of excuses, quickening commuter footsteps, deadness.

I went to sit in the waiting room and pulled out my Commuter Feedback Form, listening to the sound of the Skylark's babbling brook call mingle with intermittent chords from the piano, looking around. If you raise your eyes in a crowded waiting room, you'll see that attention is a thing of many fathoms, infinitesimal degrees to which other eyes are raised, waiting to meet yours; worlds of caring. I made a note of a young girl with tiny purple stars painted on her cheeks. She turned to her news-papered dad to demand, "what kind of bird is that?"

Willow Tits spend a whole year in the same area, having excavated their nests using decaying trees. These two knew intimately the patchy wood I'd walked through this morning: its understory of discarded stick dens, sooty fire rings, Strongbow cans, crisp packets, condoms and Fanta tops. I hadn't played here much as a kid. The wood's scent of teenager-hood was too pheromonal, the burnt tyre-seat smell blurring into the industrial rubbish of fly-tippers.

Curiously the wood litter had stayed the same all these years: different wrappings, but the same. And still, in this court of human salvage, loss, kindled desire, the hardy willow tits could spot their insect prizes. Little bills plucking what they needed from the earth.

They spied too, I thought, the creatures that made it to our home. The natterjack toad with its villainous, beloved back, the quick great-crested newt (my brother's favourite), cousin to flashing fire-starters, that fell through the cellar grating to be returned to the garden like forgetful relatives.

(In the heart of the house: a tall greenpainted grandfather clock. And my grandpa, like a king at Christmas, his mind ever more like a bat in the eaves of his head.)

Sometimes the land even brought us responsibilities. Our mum found a robin's nest on the edge of the garden, knocked from its perch. She put it back and waited but the parents didn't return. So she took the nest with its six patient eggs and placed it above the stove till they hatched. My brother and I were eagerly recruited as Life's agents then: sent to pick caterpillars, mashing them, mixing them with scrambled eggs with a single-mindedness that surprised us. We were rewarded when they flew on to our shoulders, and devastated a few days later when they puffed up and died.

Our mum cried hard tears, and for some reason her guilt comforted us. We felt part of the bigger, teeming world we'd come to know through the robin chicks and their small, fighting bodies. The other birds, the butterflies and toads and newts, the trees, even horrid ground-weaver spiders, felt under our wingspan somehow, if their lives were things we could take pleasure or regret in. We stretched. We grew.

Grandpa had said... he'd said... "*who* were those?"

And then we left, and this place was locked into childhood time. It became a no-man's land whilst the world – the real world of car billboards and rooftop conference calls – grew up around it. A home bird, weaving in and out of shrubs and middling trees, the Willow Tit needed the bigger world too. Green flight lines to get out when the woodland overtook its former haunts.

I adjust my audio equipment, sharpen my eyes.

All this the birds know, I think, being part of the air and earth we move. Zee zee zee zee zee. One perches closer now on an old chestnut tree, black cap tilting quizzically. He sifts through my thoughts for the good and sad ones in twitches of seconds. *His* great great grandfather had a raven black conk ZEE and feathers cross-hatched like the Renaissance paint on a monk's tunic. Black that dipped almost around his eye ball ZEE like the tear of a lover ZEE ZEE a troubadour who found this patch of woodland (as was) not great enough for his amorous heart ZEE ZEE ZEE that thrummed in his whistle light body.

Dreamt of flying on sometimes, to other lands. Dreamt of vast corridors of silver birch that streaked past in black and white, an alphabet he'd read across the country.

Birds who don't fear death, she chimes in, but spread the chippings of white-caked birch disease under their chicks' feet. Eyes the woman in her bright yellow jacket, the sound of nature bristling like a reed bed of tiny violins. Susurrus! Not right, not ripe like popping berries in winter, deep-hued and dropping.

Tszcbb! Crick of recorder turning off. Soft flat human mouth-ing "hope it helps, little birds." Turns and walks away.

Over the uneven land, past blackberry briar rambling thorny-struck by the last passerby's fairytale glance, that kept the old railway line frozen above the flat green cricket pitch, crested village hall and squat churches beyond, their steeples raised like antennae of longing. The land opens its ears. Away from the known world, towards the midlands train, the woman travels with a bag of birdsong.

Adjust The Tuner

Stephen Watt

Drones hovered over what was left
of the fuming earth.
Blistered as hot chocolate tongues.
Bubbling like snails inside champagne flutes.

Ladders to lightning, the ancient trees
wrench bolts out of heavy, toolbox skies
and fine-tunes a smoky pall
performing its post-humous opus;
its stale-breathed saxophones
croaking inside gales of powdered-blue suits.

Then salvation's small voice
trickles out of the radio static.
Hair, red as the carpets
autumn once rolled out in childhood.
The undraped limbs which sprout
from the rapturous applause
of seeds and rain.

They watch from their flying
phone boxes, unused Samaritans cards
spilling upon the glass floor,
gazing into a vandalised world
learning to love itself again
through banners of change
and strange new generations' persuasion

like wood ants linking their honeydew arms,
then march.

Moving Images

Leslie Tate

The soundtrack to the film *2050 The Last Generation Speaks* has been lost.

It vanished with the artworks of the London and New York galleries and the burnt-out desert-stops of Angkor Watt and Great Zimbabwe.

Like a cry in a storm it came and went
then spread upwards on light wings,
to hover as a message in the sky
warning of Easter Island and Mohenjo-daro.

It had served its purpose.

For us, it was a film in the head, rerun so often
that the images had become hand-of-God slides
streamed at all hours onto walls and ceilings.

Seen by the elderly it flashed up 1930s photos
of empty shelves and queues at the bank.

Reviewed by the screen buffs it was a switch
from unreal horror to a death in the living room,
while for the dedicated gamers it was WW3
fought for real in hand-to-mouth emergencies.

But then came the remake. Pieced together
from memory and scraps left over,
it told the history of die-ins, vigils,
lock-ons and ceremonial occupations,
and the worldwide Children's March
from capital to capital speaking truth to power
that brought things to a stop.

And now, in playback, we're caught on camera
blocking traffic, flesh against metal, protecting the wild,

then talking Satyagraha
and being the change you want to see,
as we walk with Siddhartha in the woods
while hearing the sound of
trees in the wind, rain on grass, animals feeding.

Tit

Robert Garnham

I love you more than any tit, was my first reaction. How could this possibly be? I'd thought I was irresistible, and that love, passion, moving as they do through the ether, mysterious and life-affirming, would be mine by rights. I never even thought they would be conditional on factors outside of my control. But when he'd said, "I'll only love you when the Willow Tit is secure in its natural habitat," I knew I was probably shafted.

I also knew that he was worth it. If the Willow Tit were to go extinct, then so too would be any hope of a meaningful relationship with him. Ethan. There was even something bird-like in his name.

His face was earnest, he leaned across the table in the trendy coffee shop with its bare brick walls and blackboard menu, and he said, "There's a passion lingering deep within and I ache for the sweet embrace of love. But I cannot imagine a world without the Willow Tit. Did you know that it has been known to excavate nest holes in rotting deadwood on post-industrial landscapes? But they're endangered, and to be honest, that's something of a turn-off."

My throat had become very dry. I swallowed.

"How . . . How endangered are they?"

"There's just a few thousand left."

"And you think . . . We could make a go of it? You and me, I mean. The two of us?"

"Yes. Absolutely. In fact, I'm sure of it. But the Willow Tit will always come first."

The serving robot brought our coffee over to us, but it tasted bitter, and as I looked at Ethan I felt within a certain degree of hopelessness. Why did life have to be like this? Just when I'd found someone so utterly gorgeous, who liked all of the things that I liked, and whose facial and psychic projections had almost matched exactly my own, a new factor had been introduced. Life was impossible. Or was it?

“The Willow Tit, you say?”

Ethan nodded, solemnly.

I'd always regarded myself as a prime catch, and my previous relationships had never been conditioned on the survival of a whole species. Except for the human species, of course, but that went without saying. Matt, James and Matt Number 2 had all said at the starts of our relationships that I was the perfect man and that nothing would ever happen that could possibly split us up. On each of these occasions, only one of those statements had turned out to be true. So naturally, when Ethan had added his bizarre condition to the success of our future romance, I knew that things would be different.

For the next few days I thought of nothing else but tits. It's true that my work suffered, and when my boss at the office where I design hologram dining tables asked what was bothering me, and I told her, a very funny look came over her face and she sent me to the human resources department. Everyone should have their passions, I told myself, both passions of the head and passions of the heart, but it's not often that the two are linked. The human resources robot could not understand the logic of this and someone had to be sent in to reboot it.

On the way home from the office, I decided to take a wander to the wasteland to the north of the city, a desolate place where iron and brick structures loomed in the perma-fog, and the streetlight drones hovered gingerly on the periphery. Perhaps I just wasn't thinking particularly straight, but that's what love can do to the senses. I was still dressed in my work clothes, smart casual trousers and a pristine white shirt, a jacket slung over my shoulders as I stepped over piles of brick and stunted vegetation. And then I stood there for a while, listening to the sound of absolute nothingness. No birds could I hear, no insects nor creatures of any kind, save the ceaseless rhythm of a factory somewhere close, churning out supermarket trolley wheels. Clong-ching, clong-ching, clong-ching.

“Tits?” someone asked.

I jumped.

“No!” I blurted.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “You’re all the same. The lot of you.”

And she began to walk away.

“Wait.”

She was an elderly lady, bent over a walking cane, her unkempt white hair a halo around an incredibly craggy face.

“You do mean... The bird?” I asked.

“What the bloody hell did you think I meant?” she spat. “Never heard such a load of old nonsense in my life!”

Neon shimmered through the fog in the distance. I could feel my voice close to me, as if I were indoors, and this made me feel self-conscious.

“Take me to your tits,” I whispered.

“Haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.”

And she began to walk away again.

“Hang on! Wait! It’s money, isn’t it? Well why didn’t you say so, I’ve got money. Have you got a card-reader with you?”

“I don’t need your money, soldier. All I know is that you’re here for the willow tits.”

“How on earth did you know that?”

“Because you’re all here for the willow tits.”

“What do you mean?”

She sighed.

“Follow me.”

She was pretty agile for an old lady. She hopped over brambles and bushes and I had difficulty following her, unwilling to stain my work trousers, and yet driven on by how happy Ethan might be on hearing of the lengths that I was going through for him. And all the time she walked, I could hear her muttering to herself, a random spew of unconscious words.

“...coming along here for the Willow Tit yes the Willow Tit mister fancy trousers with his Willow Tit obsession oh yes like he thinks I can’t see through him as if he were one of them holograms mister fancy trousers with his Willow Tit...”

“So . . . What do you do?,” I asked.

“I work for the RSPB, obviously, soldier,” she replied. “Or at least, that’s what it bloody feels like these days.”

“So there’s lots of interest in bird life around these parts.”

She stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Just keep close to me, soldier.”

We continued walking and neither of us said anything for a while. Eventually we came across what had once been a mighty factory, but was now only two free-standing walls. Two giant brick pieces of ruined architecture, like a massive book opened on a bed, or two hands open in prayer. She stopped for a while and looked up at its structure.

“Well?” I asked.

“Love,” she replied.

“Pardon?”

“You’re doing this for love.”

“How do you know?”

“Well it’s not like you’re going to buy me an ice cream, is it?” Her face then softened. “Who am I to stand in the way of love? If two people are meant to be together, then nothing can interfere with that kind of force. Least of all, me. I try to preserve this place.”

“You?”

“Who else? The muffin man?”

“Are there Willow Tits here?”

“One big tit, as far as I can see.” Her face softened again. “I’m sorry. It’s just, I’ve seen this all before. You know, we are all being overtaken by computers, and robots, don’t you? Everything has become tiny. Micro. Microchips. Electrical impulses. There’s no real passion, and everything is counterfeit. But there are Willow Tits, here. Robins, too. We are all trying to live together.”

“I can’t see any.”

“Follow.”

And she’s off again. I follow, only now I feel slightly differently towards her. I wonder how she survives out here in this harsh terrain. How does anyone survive? Aren’t we all conditioned to environmental factors? She’s muttering again as she walks.

“...coming along here for the Willow Tit yes the Willow Tit mister fancy trousers with his Willow Tit obsession oh yes like he thinks I can’t see through him as if he were one of them holograms mister fancy trousers with his Willow Tit...”

She’s still as sprightly as ever, though the fog seems to become even more dense. She hops over ditches and detritus, giant rusted pipes and around abandoned cars and robots. Eventually we stop in the middle of nowhere and she puts up her hand.

“Don’t you think...”

“Ssssh!”

I’m quiet. We’re both quiet, now rooted to the spot. And then I see what she can see. Forms in the fog, humanoid forms, standing still and staring into the miasma, which whirls and swirls driven by unseen currents. And every now and then the fog clears for just a little to reveal that these are not robots, nor structures, nor statures, but human beings. Men. Young men, such as myself, just standing there with their hands beside them, staring around, heads slowly moving, mouths wide agape.

“What the hell is this?” I ask.

“Like you, soldier.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look,” she says.

The fog clears, momentarily. There must be twenty of them, or thirty young men, just standing there, looking around them, mesmerised.

“They’re all here,” she says, “for the Willow Tit. Each one of them. That’s what happens, you see. Ethan sends them here. Promises love, eternal love, a chance of ever-lasting happiness.”

“Willow Tit,” one of them says.

And then another adds, “Willow Tit.”

And a third. “Willow tit.”

And then they’re all at it.

“Willow Tit! Willow Tit! Willow Tit!”

“This,” she says, “is Ethan’s army. He’s a hologram, gone rogue. He was programmed to stand in shopping precincts and sign people up for monthly direct debits saving Willow Tits in their natural habitats. And then he was re-conditioned and sold to a dating website to be hired out for the evening. He had mind-controlling mesmerising software installed to ensure that clients kept coming back. But something went wrong. There was a glitch. And the two parts of him combined, and this is what’s happened. He’s out there, every day driving men wild and sending them to this wasteland to look for Willow Tits. And do you know what, soldier? Do you want to know what the really good thing is?”

She looked at me as I shook my head.

“It’s working. The Willow Tit population is increasing. They’re working away, they’re creating habitats. The species is back from the brink!”

Squirrels of the Next Millennium

JD Smith

Ranging from Quebec to Madagascar, they display aquatic as well as terrestrial behaviour, with webbed feet seen in some local populations. Formerly seen in several colours, only grey specimens have been observed in recent decades. Around the winter solstice in their respective hemispheres, litters of two or three are born naked, and some remain nearly so throughout the life cycle. With an adult weight of 20 kilograms, they individually hunt animals smaller than themselves and in temporary packs of three to seven bring down prey of up to 150 kilograms. Attacks on humans by non-rabid individuals are uncommon, but reported incidents have increased, especially in urban centres. Like all wild animals, they should not be approached or intimidated. Those with a newly sequenced genetic variation will, when cornered, burst into flames.

If You Want Blood

Steve Ely

Sprockhövel Way (the South Kirkby bypass) is the final link of the EU-funded M1-A1 link road, designed to open up the former Yorkshire coalfield for economic development. Sprockhövel is a town in the Ruhr, twinned with South Kirkby.

Riff raff bushing Great Breaks embankment, bypass
side of Mutton Flatt lines: flat cap, spliff, .410;
creamy polecat, medicine bag, Wehrmacht-looted
Zeiss. Field of vision — hackle-back Patterdale working
brambles, bug-eyed longdog, trembling, taut;
willow scrub, birches, raking hawthorns. Tits in motley
roving through — *zi-zi taab taab taab*. Ratcheting robins,
blackbird shattering glass — muzzle-flash musket explosion.
Breath feathers settling silence; traffic-roar running
white noise interference. Down the slope and across
the blacktop, marching pylons, tractors trawling,
criss-cross contrails, Robin Hood, Leeds.

In the splintered hedgerow below the embankment,
jays rawp against arctic thunder. The sandpapered syrxinx
of Bon Scott — *no stop signs, speed limit* — leap and thrust,
flap-handed battery, ermine crests erect. Slamming
car doors clap them off to the oaks of Long Plantation —
dayglo hadrosaurian limber, dislocated hoatzin.
Hard-standing by the settling pond, the hacked Flatt's
black Jurassic. Pit-wheel altars, golden calves,
red-listed archaeopteryx. Grand opening: Mercedes,
hard-hats, hi-viz, suits; flash-bulb grins, champagne.
The scissored ribbon's a chequered flag; Jereboam,
shaken, smashed. Merkel as Shishak, Penelope Pitstop —
I do declare this bypass open. Smackhovel Way, its white trash
litter of wacky racers, roadkill owls and roe.

Great Breaks, Wheat Royds, Johnny Brown's Common,
hoarse with screaming commerce. What does the wrang-
brook say, trickling through its culvert? The absent puit
and exiled corncrake? Cyril in gaiters, waving his wire-cutters
at any who'll listen, harangues of Hollins and grubbed-out

Dungeon, Cookes and Kenyons, the Norman Yoke?
Plenty Coups said, we took their peace. Peltier says —
we pay their price. Willow tit keeps her counsel —

ꞤꞤ-ꞤꞤ taah taah taah

Merc on its roof in the splintered hedgerow,
helmets toppled, suit-flesh blown. Field of vision:
a cone of buzzards, a pylon of crows, a spite of skalding jays.
Black-capped chickadee, eagle war bonnet,
chirps from the high embankment: *I never shot nobody.*
Don't even carry a gun. I ain't never done nothing wrong.
I'm just having fun. Skunk and shotguns — powerful medicine.
Shishak breaks from the brambles and screams
in the jaws of the longdog. *ꞤꞤ-ꞤꞤ taah taah taah*

Forest Fire of Friends

Daniel Duggan

They stand together, a forest fire of friends, surrounding the fallen tree with bough broke leaves. A coffin lid handful of soil is pushed up through its basal cavity by bereaved beetles. This planet looks up on itself, it has a memory, a photo album of our evolution. It rubs its bleary eyes, remembering how it bleeds so we can thrive.

We severed the heritage line by cutting the branch bonds with our flagon lips and slack chained saws. The trees heard it all from the gossiping fungi with their wood wide pores. That underground city tethered below the sunset of soil, the two paper cups and twine that spread past the hammock of all roots, it holds the library of all present tense nature.

We are the branch of the family tree that must rope bridge the ravine between the ancients and our ancestors yet to be. We have to hold our limbs to the horizon, a thrown intention, an open armed invitation to entwine, a plaster cast canopy flung over time.

Decay threads through those fallen rings that dissipate from trunk to bark. This ebbing of the elderly to hollow corpse is a coast line packed to the rafters with life. The beach brink stands as a lighthouse to the silhouette we daub across this landscape.

We walk the water's edge, our feet beginning to drink the tide. We imbibe, our skin falls as autumn, revealing fists of flora and bone burnt fauna. The long grass collapses to its knees and humanity sees its calamity and pleads, for a second chance to dance. The redemption foxtrot of what we've forgot begins with one step in time. If we climb and entwine, we can double bow the snapped heritage line.

We are the future fossils, undecided on what family photo to leave.

Ouzel Park Log Store

Rob Lowe

Like skulls in catacombs,
Row upon row of thought,
They rest, glaring at us.
These boles' raw rings declare
As sightless sockets do
Defiance of the good
That put them in this place.

I am outstared by them:
The circles of the years,
Cracked scars of drying wood,
The records of a past,
These are my ancestors.
And sometimes, from the bark,
Tiny, sprouting green leaves

Emerge back into days:
When you stare long enough,
Even the dead will move;
And from the common tombs
Individuals speak,
Resisting the governments
That harvested their lives.

Yet the wood is friendly,
As are the bone-smooth skulls;
And if I rest my hand,
Still, upon each surface,
Hosts of voices murmur –
Everything done remains –
I am calm, as the land.

Starting Over

Jasmin Perry

“You want to come round this evening? My dad left money for us to order pizza.”

Darya sighed.

“Can’t. Mum’s making me go to some protest thing.”

“Can’t you get out of it?”

She looked at the leaflets her mum had piled on the kitchen table. One stack each.

“Not a chance. Another time?”

Charlie went on for a while, trying to persuade her, but gave up eventually, his voice tinged with disappointment. She slid her phone into her pocket and trudged upstairs. Well, she might as well say goodbye to her chances of ever getting a boyfriend. It better be worth it.

Her mum had told her to wrap up warm, so she put on another pair of socks and dug out her winter coat from the back of her wardrobe. You never could tell what the weather was going to do.

“Darya? We should probably set off soon.”

Her mum’s voice floated upstairs. Long gone were the days when she would have to yell at the top of her voice to get her attention. Ever since the school closed, it felt like Darya had been on constant tenterhooks, waiting for the announcement they’d warned of. It hadn’t come. Yet.

They walked down the street in silence. After less than a mile, Darya’s shoulder started aching, weighed down by the cotton tote-bag stuffed with flyers.

“Surely these do more harm than good? You know, to the trees?” she said, gesturing towards her bag. She could almost hear her mum rolling her eyes.

“Quit that attitude. Anyway, I’ve already told you, these ones are left over. They don’t print them anymore. They can’t.”

“Right.”

It took forever to get to the Arboretum. Past the school, the old train station, down miles and miles of disused dual-carriageways, and then the buildings gave way, the sky opened up and she could see the trees.

They were much more alive than she remembered. Green leaves rustled in the wind, branches swaying as if the tree-trunks were breathing.

“It’s got to be ages since we last came here.”

“Since you last came here,” her mum corrected. “I’m still surprised I managed to convince you today.”

Darya shrugged, feeling the heat of embarrassment in her cheeks. There was always something better to do. But then, what had dad told her? To keep her mum company. And what had she not done? Exactly that.

They were getting closer to the perimeter now. If she squinted, she could just about make out a thin crowd of people, acting as a human fence around the land.

“Do you know any of them?”

“I expect so. We’ll see.”

The crowd was holding a piece of red tape, marking the boundary. One man held his son in one arm, a piece of cardboard in the other. It read: “Stop construction, save the arboretum.”

“Come on.”

Her mum was holding up the tape for her. She ducked underneath and joined the protesters on the other side.

“Who are we supposed to give these to? Everyone here seems pretty well informed,” she muttered, clutching a leaflet.

“There’ll be people. Just wait.”

Her mum walked ahead, away from the protesters and into the trees.

“Mum, come on. Where are you going?”

Her feet hurt. She was pretty sure she had blisters on every toe.

“Just follow me, two minutes.”

Darya sighed, but followed behind. It would be a long time before she would let herself be talked into doing something like this again. She could have been three slices into a pizza by now, if only she'd gone to Charlie's.

Her mum had finally stopped walking. She was standing in front of an enormous tree, the trunk at least as big as twelve whole pizzas put together.

Darya let her tote bag slip down her shoulder, landing lopsided on the ground. She bent down to make sure none of the leaflets fell out, and by the time she stood up again, her mum had both arms stretched around the tree trunk, her cheek squished into the bark.

“Oh. My god. What on earth are you doing?”

This day had been weird enough already.

“Just try it, love.”

“Try what? Getting a tree imprint on my face?”

Her mum twisted away from the tree to look at her.

“Give it a hug.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Silence. Somehow, she knew they wouldn't be leaving until she hugged the damn tree. Why couldn't she have a normal parent?

With an audible huff, Darya trudged across the grass until she was standing at the base of the trunk. Up close, the bark looked soft, almost hairy in places. It stretched up to the sky, branches sticking out in every direction.

“It's a redwood,” her mum whispered. “My mum brought me here when I was younger than you. The trees are wiser than we'll ever be.”

Darya rolled her eyes but found herself stretching her arms out. Her 16-year-old heart pressed against the centuries-old trunk.

* * * * *

“Now, some of you may remember this arboretum dominating local news nine years ago, as protesters successfully saved it from developers. But, it seems all of that struggle may have been for nothing. Recent reports show that the trees have deteriorated beyond reasonable levels and are now decaying, all due to soil pollution.”

Darya flopped back on the sofa, squeezing her eyes shut in an attempt to block out the TV. They were showing footage of the trees, all covered in moss, without a single new leaf in sight.

“Don’t worry about it, babe. Look, they’ve launched this new scheme at work which is going to sort us right out.”

She took a deep breath, bracing herself for another onslaught of nonsense from Charlie. He was so out of touch it was almost funny. Almost.

“They’re making this settlement in the Arctic, right? All high-tech stuff, self-sustaining and all that. And the best part? No oil needed.”

Her eyes snapped open. The news anchor was now talking about the oil shortages, showing videos of the civil unrest that had broken out across the country. You could hardly step out of your front door without someone throwing something at you anymore.

“It’ll be like starting over,” Charlie carried on. He was still in his suit. Working late, probably.

“No,” she interrupted. “It will be like running away.”

“Come on, don’t be like that. We can’t sit around here forever; this isn’t our place.”

“What, our place is in the Arctic with a bunch of stuck-up billionaires is it?”

“Well, I mean, yeah.” He shrugged.

She felt around on the sofa for the remote and clicked the TV off. How did she end up here? Charlie never really got it anymore. Maybe he never had.

“I wasn’t even watching that part anyway,” she said, trying to move to safer grounds of conversation.

“What?”

“On the TV. The oil. I wasn’t watching it. There was a segment about the arboretum on before.”

Charlie’s hands drifted to his pocket and pulled out his phone. She was losing him.

“Oh right. You used to go there with your mum, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Used to.” She paused. “It’s been so long without her.”

He was already tapping out a message.

“Sorry babe, I’ve got to get back to work really, but anyway, the Arctic, yeah? Should be settled in the next month.”

He bent down to kiss her forehead, his tie flapping against her face.

“Gotta go.”

She dug her fingernails into her knees, forcing herself to keep her mouth shut. Anger was oozing out of her, overflowing so quickly she wasn’t sure she could stop it. She couldn’t do it anymore. It wasn’t right. Abandoning a situation that she, and everyone else on the Earth, had created. There was no way she could bury her head in the sand anymore.

Hoisting her rucksack onto her back, she looked around at the room. It looked virtually the same. With Charlie’s stuff covering almost every surface, you couldn’t really tell that most of hers was missing.

She’d left a note. One sheet of paper, folded in half on the pillow. She hadn’t said where she was going. Didn’t want him to come and find her. Not that he would anyway. He’d have to tear himself away from his phone, and he would never manage that.

The garage was usually Charlie's domain, but not today. She slid the key off the mantelpiece and made her way outside, squinting at the sunlight. Inside, she flicked on the electric light and started to sift her way through. She knew what she needed. Solar powered charger. Tent. Ground sheet. Gas cannisters. Camping stove. Water filtration kit they'd bought on a whim for a trip abroad, but never ended up using.

She piled the lot into the bike trailer Charlie had been sent as part of his Christmas hamper from work, and connected it to her rusty bicycle. It had a flat tyre, but she didn't care. It would do the job.

An hour later, after the most exercise she'd done in years, she was at the arboretum. She followed the route she'd taken years earlier, imagining the red-tape, the protesters, her mum scrambling ahead. The trees' leaves weren't green anymore, but their trunks were, covered in moss. She climbed up the verge, towing her bike behind her. It wasn't quiet. The air was filled with a cacophony of bird-sounds, squawks and tinkling melodies. The trees may be dying, but they were still acting as homes to hundreds of creatures, by the sounds of it. And now, they would be a home for her.

* * * * *

People had joined her over the years. She'd guessed that they heard about her on the news, or caught a glimpse of her khaki tent as they passed by the grounds. Some only stayed for a few weeks, some stuck around. They'd got an established vegetable plot now. In the beginning, none of her seeds grew. Although, she had taken them from the garage, so they'd probably been out-of-date. That, or it was the polluted soil. Clive, one of the leaders of the old protester group, turned up a few weeks after her and brought more seeds with him. His took to the soil straightaway.

"You must have the magic touch," she'd said when she saw the first green shoots poking through the earth.

"I don't think so," he chuckled. "They just weren't ready to grow before."

She wandered away from the camp after that, thinking back to when she'd preferred pizza over root vegetables. It hadn't been her time to grow before either. But it was now.

Her feet moved on autopilot, taking her to the redwood. She visited it most mornings, before she'd even eaten breakfast.

It still stood tall, although it was closer to grey than red now. Without hesitating, she walked up to it and stretched her arms around the trunk. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine her mum holding the tree on the other side. She breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of the wood, her heart full of contentment. The bark was rough under her fingertips, refusing to let her forget what her species had done to the forest, to the soft surface of the tree. But then, overhead, a rustling sound broke through her thoughts. Peering out of a hollow in the tree, just above her head, was a tiny white bird with a black helmet. Chirping birdsong echoed through the trees. A call and response that felt as old as time.

“As long as we still have the trees, we’ll find a way.”

The Wilderning

Lucy H Friend

(i) *world is water.*

Still they stand. The ancient ones,
their swollen bark blackened with oil,
hollows filled with driftwood salt that
squats like dust on the aftermath.
Where drowning ends, the ripples
rustle as branches breach
like gasping fingers,
stretching, pruned, to
the open sky.

They stand still. The ancient ones,
their lungs heavy with the sunken air,
roots unwavering lapped by seas
as dense as fog and bitter as thaw,
through the devastating clouds
and ritual bathings of the dead.

(While sisters, their flesh sliced
to leaves, lie saturated,
their ink bled out like
breath; a library
burned by flood and
waterlogged memory)

the ancient ones remain
in guardianship, as
presently a wicked wind
whips the foaming tops,
emerged like cloud from
stricken seas. *Here it is,*

the crack between
water and space,
the pocket under the
door of the universe:
the tree house surface
of a forgotten world.

Here, she whispers, I have found

*(snatched
from the brink of
untold depths)*

(ii) *the living.*

For in the world's wake,
for where the sea breaks,
for where drowning ends,
there is wilderning

spread below and tucked
into the folding crook of
sky, a movement creased
like waves, bark borne, in
arks formed of a thousand rings.

The wilderning

festers in the fungal rot
of woody flesh. It gnaws
with gnatty teeth and
hisses to the wind-tossed
sky, rich with the ferocity
of living; the larva
of apocalypse, feasting
on the belly of the
sunken world, seeking

what? The fallen stars of night?
Dreams unmet by minds
die on changing currents, or
sink to the bramble-bound
orchards of the floor. Hope
collects like by-product, lodged
in lungs and tangled roots,
knotted to the ancient stumps like
ribbon to a may pole;

lost

*like ancient lullabies or
subaquatic psalms.*

(iii) *and yet*

(While sisters, unburied,
lie saturated, their breath
dissolved like planet sea)

the guardians remain, as
presently 2000 kinds
bring blossom to
a broken world, tended
symbiotically. *Here it is,*

where hollow tree holds
airbound life 'neath sunken waves
like blood vessel. We

(have been here before)

the children of deep waters
will learn to bloom like algal poetry,
praying all that rusts away
will be replaced by wilderning.

Birds After the Firestorm

Sarah Davies

The scream of

an organ in a church
when someone is playing
all the notes all at once

All combustible murmuration –
we understand the movement
of an entire flock

wheeling in the sky,
circled around
dancing, swaying

merged into a single powerful vortex,
lidar and radar wind
in the form of a phoenix, anvil

Color-coded by the velocity of air currents,
the mass
a hovering spirit –

It happens again, again:
a hawk picks up a smouldering stick in its claws
drops it in a fresh patch of dry grass

waits with its others
for the mad run
of scorched creatures

wears the Rorschach mask,
which shifts
and morphs into different abstract *patterns*

better to see
the enemy
rather than be eaten

This new thing nicknamed
Lord God bird
on account of its knocking.

And where did they fly,
our songbirds?
Wherever they could.

But housing grows short
and birds are not humane.
They're birds, after all, not people

And yet, a songbird
perched on a jet tree,
or in its rotten heart

mimics the ringtone of a ruined device
and hopeful, territorial
countersing, countersings

A Willow bird, *Poecile montanus*
finds, that with the movement
of its wings, the music opens

there is, in the world
of ruined pathways, a possibility
for a bright new song

What The Tree Has

Sarah Davies

Felled, namechanged to wood
is what the trees have growing –
body maps of vessels, blood and bone,
the pulse contraction of the sap,
the xylum and capellum, the greening
of this oxygen, leafsong

What the Tree wants
lies within it, entwined and layered-
the knots it does not wish you to cut out,
the concentric path,
the forest heart.
Wood will speak if you let it

Carvers, all along the road
from the hill country to where the forest
shrivels, paper green, then disappears,
transmute for a living.
It's simply work, or worship
with their chisels and their lathes

Some are listening, twist Tree's branches
into the forms that it desires,
(less shape than storytelling)
or negotiate, smooth compromises.
Wood's grain is shine then,
the surface polished

Others saw and sand, some axe and hurt-
sever and scrape, make furniture, make useful,
hollow cradles, joint the long, straight box,
four walls for man's eternity-
Tree goes back to the soil,
this does not make it happy, listen –

What the Tree wants
lies within it, seed and shoot and root,
the saplings that punch towards too-rainy sky,
the exploratory reach of branch,
the shivering of leaves
Wood will speak if you let it

Petrified Forest

Luca Goaten

A friend told me about a petrified forest
somewhere deep inside America,
inside its ancient elsewhere,
and she said that the trees there are so old
they have turned to stone, littering the landscape
for millions of years like plastic,

and that time has been ground down
into stillness, and all that time
has become sand, and there is so much of it
that when she walked through the desert
she left deep footprints
that looked too new for the earth,
as though she should not be there
or know such a place existed,
like it belonged to no one, or someone
else, like a holy place.

She said *it felt sacred*, like the trees contain
the pain of their roots
mapping out rainfalls,
of sunlight on wood,
of leaves making new air –
each one a touchstone.

But now they just resound
with a past that she could hear,
like pressing her ear up against a seashell,
and when she looked down at the faces
of the logs, all like milky ways and planet cores,
deep into their fossil rings of memory,
she traced each groove with her finger
like a needle on a vinyl record, listening

to the sounds preserved in the quartz:
the time before the horses,
the hooves splitting open the wilderness,
the firelit cries across the mesa,
before the smoke and the extinctions.

[Extracts from the Eurasian Bryophyte Society Report, the year 3121]

David Hawkins

Cornish Path-moss (*Ditrichum cornubicum*)

Since all industry was finally moved off planet around the year 2180, metallophytes (species that thrive on high mineral-content soils and metal waste) have successfully spread into many new niches. Once confined to a handful of microsites in what was Ireland and the Kernow peninsula, expansive citron-green carpets of this tender little moss may now be observed over wide areas of former workings. On trips to the surface, turn left at Truth Gate no. 3 and almost immediately you will encounter a curious scene: here path-moss traces the spectral layout of copper piping that once supplied underfloor heating to what was probably a school.

[...]

Stipple-leaved Skin-moss (*Aplodon dermalucens*)

Following an extraordinary and unprecedented act of speciation, a series of genetic mutations in Corpse-moss (*Aplodon wormskioldii*) allowed it to colonise the epidermis of live *Homo sapiens*. The latter species is of course now increasingly rare, but it seems that as humans became more sedentary the moss was able to thrive in the warm and moist conditions of their bodies. Spore-producing capsules have never been recorded; spread is sometimes vegetative but largely happens by means of the flask-shaped gemmae, which pass from one human to another during their rare moments of physical contact.

[...]

Knob-hole Yoke-moss (*Zygodon forsteri*)

Expansion of the New New Forest over recent centuries has allowed this dainty epiphyte, which was previously threatened, to become relatively common. Its shiny dark green cushions favour knob-holes and damp creases in the bark of veteran beech trees. As the moss requires plenty of

‘natural’ light, illumines have been set up in strategic locations. Proper recognition of the therapeutic effects of spending time in forests has now benefited many species, due to concerted efforts to preserve and enlarge this ecosystem. It’s a shame our forebears didn’t make this connection earlier, but at least *Homo sapienissimus x maquina* is able to go some way to mending their deleterious effects.

Crow Learns the Names

Ruth Gilchrist

Crow flew over the field and where her wing dipped and feathers brushed the tall grasses, frost grew. When she reached the house, Crow landed in the fir tree and called to her mother. It had been a long time since the woman had looked out on the world. Now she opened the window.

Through the open window came *Hericium coralloides*, *Zygodon forestri*, *Licertia agilis*, and with them came *Limosa limosa*. But the woman did not know their names and she was confused. In her distress her hair blew across her face, making her angry. Outrage made her weep and hide her head. Outside Crow grew impatient and bounced across the lawn, shattering frost under her claws, tossing leaves in the air. Feeling the breath from the last leaves fall and hearing Crow's jibe, the woman folded self-pity with anger and put them away in a drawer so she could leave the house.

She went to her neighbour, the river. There she asked the names of the beings that she had let in, and the river taught her. "*Their names are coral tooth fungi, knothole moss, sand lizard and with them has come black-tailed godwit.*" Because the river told her these names, they became etched in the woman's mind and she could remember them. The woman talked with the river for a long time about these things, so the river also gave her the ancestral stories for these creatures. At the end of the evening the woman returned to the house and Crow went with her, half bounding half flying, bringing the darkness behind her.

Because the woman now knew their names, she could make a home for these beings in her place, and from their stories came their songs. The woman sang these stories to the fire so her daughter-Crow could sit all night with one ear to the chimney. Once Crow had heard the songs, she stretched out her wings and pushed blue up from the sea, and with her beak she bled orange into the sky. Crow then flew over the land, swooping low over towns and villages, hamlets and cities, calling as she went. So, in their last dreams all the children heard these names from Crow: Coral tooth fungi, knothole moss, sand lizard and black-tailed godwit. Across the land at breakfast tables, on school busses, on walks across the park,

children spoke these names and their knowledge grew out of their toes and into the ground, weaving a web through the soil.

As she dozed in the pale light from the open window, the woman sensed this web as it flowed up the chair legs, and she smiled.

The Rememberers

Kevan Manwaring

Simone stepped into the grove. She had finally found them, or at least she hoped so. They weren't what she expected, as she stood there with the straps of her rucksack digging into her shoulders, her body aching from the days of hiking. Tired and thirsty and hungry, she struggled to take in the vista: a make-shift village of benders, soggy tents, an old caravan, and a tarp over what looked like a field kitchen and mess. Someone dressed in a heavy coat over pyjamas sleepily fed a fire around which stumps and camping chairs had been placed. A couple of figures slumbered, wrapped in sleeping bags in their chairs before it. Another, a middle-aged woman, stared intently at a kettle in the mess, drawing on a cigarette. She noticed Simone standing there, and made a short whistle to the firekeeper, who caught her eye, then followed her gaze.

Pulling back her dreadlocks, the firekeeper gave Simone a welcoming smile.

“Hello. Just arrived, I see. Want to come over here and thaw out? I'm sure Shirl here would make you a cuppa if you ask nicely.”

Shirley scowled, but pulled an extra mug from the washing up rack.

Simone was encouraged by the firekeeper, who winked, and kept feeding the banked fire with twigs, blowing on it to get it going again.

Shyly Simone approached, and with relief pulled off her rucksack, placing it next to a hay bale. She rolled and rubbed her shoulders.

“I bet you're glad to take that off. Take a seat, luv. You look done in.”

Simone obliged and sank into a battered arm chair with its filling spilling out of threadbare patches.

“I'm Tilda, and this is Shirley.” The firekeeper nodded to the bearer of a tray of mugs.

“Morning. Guess you had milk. Sugar's in the tin.”

She offered one to the new arrival, then one to Tilda.

“Cheers, Shirl. Blimey, look – digestives. Must be a special occasion!” She grabbed one, and offered the packet to Simone, who gingerly pulled one out.

“Go on, take a couple – you’re all ribs and thin air.”

“Not every day we get a fresh one, is it?” said Shirley, settling down with her own mug. She gave Simone an appraising glance. “Come far, have you?”

Simone focused on dunking her digestive and not losing any. She blushed at the attention, and only managed a nod.

“Looks like it, if you don’t mind me saying so,” continued Shirley. “Well, finish that and we’ll find you a towel. There are hottish showers in the horsebox over there. They’ve just started the burner, so the water’ll be toasty soon.”

“Thanks,” Simone mumbled, licking the crumbs from her lips. She struggled not to wolf down both biscuits at once. Her supplies had run out yesterday lunchtime.

“Once you’re scrubbed up, we’ll see about getting you some proper food. It’s not the Ritz here, but we have soup, beans, toast, that kind of thing if you’re not fussy.”

Tilda was satisfied with how the fire was going and settled back with her mug. She blew on it then took a sip. “So how did you hear about us?”

“The rumours on Blinkjaw,” she muttered.

“What’s that?” asked Shirley.

“Oh, one of those social media thingies – y’know, for young people,” explained Tilda.

“Alright, don’t rub it in,” laughed Shirley.

“They said about a group of rebels in the forest who were keeping the memory alive of ... um ...”

“Extinct species,” said Shirley, matter-of-factly, flicking her butt into the fire.

For the first time Simone looked up, her eyes bright with hope.

“That’s us, alright. Loony tree-huggers, the lot of us,” joked Tilda.

“You did well to find us. We try to keep a low profile. There are always nutters, y’know – those who want to trash the camp out of spite. Some seem a bit too well organised to be lone wolves. Good kit. Paramilitary types. We’ve had to scarper a couple of times – drop everything, and start again. But they can’t take what’s up here, can they Tilda?” She tapped her temple.

Tilda raised her mug. “She may look like a mad old bat...”

“Oi!”

“But she’s got a brilliant memory, that one.”

“So have you, Tild. No marbles, but plenty of storage capacity.”

“Cheeky mare! Or should I say cheeky Violet Click Beetle.”

“You can talk, Miss Royal Splinter Crane-fly.”

Simone looked from one to the other – eyes widening. “So, you’re ...”

“That’s right,” Shirley nodded. “We’re two of the Rememberers. I’ve committed everything to my memory about Violet Click Beetles. Ask me anything about them, and I could go on for hours.”

“And she would,” Tilda groaned.

“You’re just as bad! Who thought there was so much to know about the Royal Splinter Crane-fly!” Shirley laughed.

“They’re fascinating, but ... don’t get me started,” smiled Tilda.

“How long did it take to learn...?” Simone asked, feeling a little better after the tea and biscuits.

“The Know?” Tilda shrugged.

“A couple of weeks, several hours, every day. Until we had it down to a tee.”

“Is it a lot to learn?” Simone asked.

“It’s not about being word perfect. We don’t just learn things parrot fashion. What’s the point in that? We *study* them, and try to understand their worlds – their qualities, their mating habits, habitat, place in the ecosystem... their miraculous distinctiveness...” explained Shirley, examining her cracked fingernails and frowning.

“We get so familiar with them, we start to identify with them. To many here, I’m simply known as Crane-fly, Shirl as Violet.”

“We embody them, do you see? We carry their memory. It feels like a sacred task to me,” said Tilda.

“It is. If we forget, who will remember them?” said Shirley, waving a hand.

“But surely, they’re... recorded somewhere?” asked Simone, growing bolder.

“No, that’s the point. They want you to forget that species have gone extinct on their watch. They wipe them from the public records. It becomes harder and harder to find out information about them. It is like a form of forced amnesia. They hope they’ll just fall off the radar, be forgotten – and they get away with it. They drown out the devastating losses with the white noise of other news – it’s a form of ecological gaslighting,” said Tilda, becoming agitated.

“So folk like us, who take this loss personally – millions of years of evolution, how could you not? It’s an insult to all creation – anyway, we have gathered together to keep their memories alive. Off-line, off-grid. Nothing can hack us or pull the plug. Going analogue was our best

strategy. Reviving the lost art of memory. It's amazing what you can store up there," said Shirley, tapping her head again, "once you no longer have to remember pins and passwords, and all the clutter and nonsense of daily life."

"How many of you are here?" asked Simone, looking about the slumbering camp.

"Twenty seven of us. We always could do with more, if you're interested?" asked Tilda with a twinkle. "We've focused on the ancient trees – which can support up to two thousand species. Other groups have concentrated on birds, the life of the ocean... different habitats and biomes."

"I think what you do is incredible, inspiring. But ..."

"What is it? Come on, speak up, chuck," said Shirley.

"Is remembering them enough? It's not going to bring them back, is it?"

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, girl," said Tilda. "But finish that and go and get scrubbed up – and all will be explained over lunch. You probably need a full belly first. Helps you think straighter. And you'll need your wits about you if you want join our merry band."

* * * * *

Despite the awkwardness at disrobing in the little covered area before entering the converted horsebox, the experience of showering with a view of the woodland all around her was a surprisingly pleasant one. And after days of sweaty hiking, lugging a rucksack bulging with her few essential possessions plus a tent, sleeping bag, and basic cooking kit, the effect of soap and hot water was near blissful. She felt the tension of her 'escape', as she thought of it, flow away with the grimy water. It had been a big decision, to leave all that she had known before: the relative security of undergraduate studies, her family home nearby, her network of friends, and the familiar landmarks of her uni town. There was the pressure – from peers, from society – to settle down, to earn some money, to fit in and

play along with the system, however broken it was. In the middle of it, it was sometimes hard to discern the important messages, the real truths, amid the blizzard of fake news, advertorials, blatant misinformation and propaganda. It was even harder sometimes to hear oneself think.

Yet, here, in this sylvan space – a ragged bit of woodland on the Borders – there was a reassuring sense of headspace, of peace. Of course, even this was threatened by the latest high-speed link. Nowhere was safe unless it was defended. No natural resource, or wonder, or everyday miracle, could be taken for granted any more. All had to be fought for.

And Simone wanted to do her bit.

She stepped from the shower with fresh resolve.

* * * * *

When she emerged, Simone was greeted by a semi-circle of the Rememberers – raggedly eclectic, a rainbow of ethnicities and genders in a mufti of outdoors gear, outlandish knitwear, sensible boots, colourful scarves, funky hats, and DIY jewellery.

Tilda and Shirley smiled encouragingly, and Simone’s anxiety was eased a little by their presence.

A hawk-nosed man with long iron grey hair decorated with beads stepped forward.

“Simone, welcome. I’m Eagle-claw, this is Coral-tooth, Knothole, and N-Bat.”

He gestured to the crescent. Others watched from their dwellings, or cast a curious eye over whilst going about their tasks.

“I hear you would like to join us. Are you ready to become a Rememberer?”

Simone chewed on her lip. Tilda and Shirley smiled at her proudly and she felt supported by their belief.

“Yes.”

“Learning the Know will take considerable effort. You will be cross-examined by three of us – if they identify any major errors you will fail; for minor errors you are allowed to retry after two weeks. You only get three attempts. We have much to do, and can’t be taking on any deadweight. Do you understand?”

Simone nodded, chewing her lip again.

“Then there is something else you must be prepared for,” said Eagle-claw. He glanced at the others, and they each rolled up their sleeves on their left arm.

Simone gasped as she beheld a complex series of bands on each forearm.

“Do you know what this is?” asked the man.

She shook her head.

“It is the DNA fingerprint of the species we remember. When we pass the oral examination we then must undergo the tattooing. This commits us to our chosen task for life. But it is not just for show...” he nodded to N-Bat, who produced a scanner, which he ran over Eagle-claw’s forearm – a thin red line following the contours.

Simone gasped, as before her eyes a hologram of the species appeared, projected by the scanner. It rotated, and multiple tables and data streams floated next to it.

“We hold the memory of the species in our minds as an act of respect, and also as a backup in the event of complete technological breakdown; but the DNA ink is to help *resurrect* the species if the opportunity occurs. There was substantial work done into this before the Meltdown in ’21...”

He held up his hands defensively as others raised their voices.

“I know there are all sorts of problems with genetic research, ethically, and we can argue that until the cows come home – but we’re talking about resurrection here, not mutation. With the right tech we have a chance to revive our lost brothers and sisters. How else will we bring back the ancients of the future?”

Simone felt a little unsteady on her feet.

“We have to have hope, Simone,” said Tilda. “We don’t want to just cling onto the past, onto what is lost. We want to restore and rewild – be like the ancient trees, so many of which have been lost, and shelter hundreds of species: an ark of tomorrow.”

“Well, Simone, are you willing to accept this challenge?”

She felt them all look at her. Beyond, she heard the sounds of the forest, birdsong, and the trickling of a small stream hidden by the foliage. So much life, and yet so fragile – and yet like the invisible networks of the forest she had studied, the mycelia that supported the sylvan ecosystem, there was a resilient strength here, each fine fibre contributing to and supporting the whole.

She could be one of those strands – linking the past to the future, and passing on the hope.

Finally, she replied.

Back from the Brink

Back from the Brink is one of the most ambitious conservation projects ever undertaken. Its aim is to save 20 species from extinction, and benefit over 200 more, through 19 projects that span England; from the tip of Cornwall to Northumberland. It's the first time ever that so many conservation organisations have come together with one focus in mind – to bring back from the brink of extinction some of England's most threatened species of animal, plant and fungi.

Willow Tit Project

What is a Willow Tit?

Small, stocky and quietly coloured, this is the UK's most threatened resident bird. We've lost 94% of them since the 1970s, and they are now extinct in most of their former haunts in the south and south-east of England.

They spend the whole year in much the same area, favouring damp scrub or young woods, and eat mainly insects. They will also eat berries and seeds in winter. Remarkably, they excavate their own nest holes every year, often using standing stumps of soft rotting deadwood. As a result, they are unlikely to use traditional nest-boxes.

Why are they in trouble?

As these birds are so sedentary, they are very vulnerable to loss and fragmentation of habitat. They like old industrial areas which generate scrub and young woodland, but these are often considered wasteland, and not worthy of conservation effort. Even if these areas are not developed, this will eventually turn to mature woodland if not managed, and become unsuitable for Willow Tits. The Dearne Valley, the focus of this project, is a largely post-industrial landscape. There is also a surviving population in Wigan Flashes in the north-west, in a similar area of reclaimed coalfield.

How we will help the Willow Tit

This Back from the Brink project, led by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and the RSPB, has been working hard to help Willow Tits in the Dearne Valley by ensuring there is good habitat for them, and improving linkage between patches. Annual surveys have allowed us to monitor the impact of our work on habitats. We need to understand better what sorts of areas this bird likes best, and how much of it they need to thrive. We've been finding out even more about this species by using state of the art technology, especially to find out what prevents them spreading through the landscape, but also to learn more about what they need.

Working on a landscape-scale with professional biologists, local communities and others – we will continue to help this vulnerable bird.

What we're aiming for

This project is now in its final year. By the end of the project, we aim to have improved the conservation status of the Willow Tit in the Dearne valley, by learning more about their needs, and by building on existing, good partnerships to safeguard their future. The wonderful thing about this project is that what we have been discovering here about improving and expanding quality habitat will benefit the species elsewhere, too.

Poecile Montanus

Bryony Carling

I'm bigger than a blue
Smaller than a great,
A rare type of tit
That likes to sleep in late.
Roughly 12 grams heavy
And 12 centimetres long,
I sing in the wastelands
An unmistakable song.
I love daddy long legs
They make a great meal,
I know you however
Wouldn't see the appeal.
I excavate my nest holes
In decaying wood,
To lay six to eight eggs
If I feel like I should.
You might recognise me
By the pale panel I wear,
Under my wings
A soft subtle flare.
Black, brown and white
With a sooty black cap,
With my nasal call
I'm a small charming chap.
'Marsh tit!' they call
Whenever they see me,
As if! Seeing me
Isn't that easy.
If I flash my wing,
You'll know straight away,
You've been graced by a willow tit
It's your lucky day.

Ancients of the Future

What are “ancients of the future”?

There is something about ancient trees that inspires wonder; they are often rich in history and cultural heritage. But ancient trees, historic wood pasture and parkland are also some of the most important and exciting habitats for wildlife in the UK. An astonishing amount of UK wildlife is reliant on these ancient trees – over 2,000 species. The trees seem indomitable, their habitats and wildlife secure, but actually they are under threat and declining.

Why is this habitat at risk?

The key challenge facing ancient trees and the wildlife that relies on them is habitat continuity. Without that, much of their wildlife will be unable to survive. There is a growing threat from the increased prevalence of tree diseases and, potentially, climate change. Of greatest concern is the age gap between the existing ancient trees, rich in biological and cultural history, and the “ancients of the future”.

How we will bring back the “ancients of the future”

This Back from the Brink project, led by Buglife, is working with landowners and managers in key places across England. We will secure that vital continuity in some of our most iconic landscapes, focusing on 28 highly threatened species. These include the Violet Click Beetle, the Royal Splinter Crane-fly, Eagle’s-claw Lichen, Coral-tooth Fungi, Knothole Moss and the Noctule Bat.

As part of this project, we have been calling on expert and citizen science, trialling new survey and management techniques. Crucially, we have been working with a range of practitioners, from land managers to tree surgeons and historic landscape architects; developing a toolbox of training, information and guidance, to influence how sites are managed in future and to raise awareness about species.

We hope that through this project, we will have influenced public attitudes to ancient trees and decay loving creatures and fungi, by offering close-up

encounters with some of our most threatened and elusive ancient tree wildlife.

What we're aiming for

This project is now in its final year. By the end of the project, we aim to have increased the resilience of ancient trees and landscapes in target areas, protecting them from existing and emerging threats. In particular, we want to ensure there will be that vital continuity of habitat far into the future. Our knowledge on threatened species and how to conserve them will be increased and measures put in place to secure their future.

Author Biographies

Anna Kisby is a Devon-based poet, archivist and author of the pamphlet *All the Naked Daughters* (Against the Grain Press, 2017). She won the Binsted Arts prize 2019, BBC Proms Poetry competition 2016, and was commended in Faber's New Poets Scheme. Her next pamphlet explores historical magical practitioners.

Beth McDonough swims year-round in the Tay, foraging nearby. In *Handfast* (with Ruth Aylett), she explored autism in verse, whilst Aylett considered dementia. Anthologised widely, McDonough is published in *Magma*, *Stand*, *Gutter* and elsewhere. She continues to work intermedially. *Lamping for Pickled Fish* (4Word) is her first solo pamphlet.

Bryony Carling is an Living Landscape Officer at Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. A lover of wildlife, Bryony composed *Poecile montanus* after being inspired by a colleague, who works on the Back from the Brink project.

Carl Alexandersson is a queer writer and performance poet. He is currently pursuing his undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. His work has been published in the 2019 *Solstice Shorts Festival: Time & Tide* anthology, the *Lies, Dreaming* podcast, *The Inkwell*, and more.

Catherine Kwella is a market gardener, food activist, environmental educator and occasional poet. Her desire to write comes from being enchanted by the landscapes and life around her, with urban greenspaces and other "edgelands" holding special fascination. She lives in Midlothian with her partner and a lurcher.

Christopher James is a winner of the National Poetry Competition, Bridport, Oxford Brookes and Ledbury poetry prizes. He works in London for a children's charity and lives in Suffolk with his family, folding bicycle and ukulele.

Daniel Duggan: I write to pour out of me, the parts that need wings. I'm warehouseman poet with cracked skin, heavy boots and sunset hair. I'm a wild thought hunter, residing in Peebles, in the Scottish Borders.

David Hawkins is a writer, editor and naturalist from Bristol. He has a special interest in plants, especially moss. His writing has appeared in *Arc Poetry*, *Blackbox Manifold*, *Interpreter's House*, *Magma*, *Otoliths* and *White Review* among others. He was awarded second prize in the 2015 National Poetry Competition.

Emily Richards, born in 1971, grew up in Canterbury but spent most of her adult life in Berlin before meeting her wife Mel in Yorkshire in 2005. In 2013, Emily and Mel washed up on the Isle of Rum to live in Kinloch Castle for two years. Emily is now writing a book about this transformational experience, *The Castle Captured Me*, which was shortlisted last year for the Nan Shepherd Prize.

Jacob Spurrell: I am a 25-year-old writer and poet currently studying medicine at the University of Dundee. I have a Creative Writing MA from the University of Nottingham. I mainly draw upon my interest in history and from my time living in Korea as the inspiration for my work.

Jane Lovell is an award-winning poet whose work is steeped in natural history, science and folklore. Her latest collection is *This Tilting Earth* published by Seren. Jane also writes for *Dark Mountain* and *Elementum Journal*. She is Writer-in-Residence at Rye Harbour Nature Reserve.

Jasmin Perry recently completed her Creative Writing MA at Bath Spa University. She was listed as one of *Rife Magazine's* 24 Most Influential Bristolians Under 24 in 2019 after starting Weston Writer's Nights. She was selected for the Bristol Penguin WriteNow event and is working on her first novel.

JD Smith's fourth collection, *The Killing Tree*, was published in 2016, and his other books include the essay collection *Dowsing and Science* (2011). His work in several genres has appeared in publications including *Dark Mountain*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Terrain*.

A creative imaginalist, **Jeremy Garnett's** adventures of future microcosms spill out from the nascent boundary of the slumbering veil. Based in Darwin, Australia, his tales span the vastness between environmental hope and poetical nightmare. Currently working on his next book/s, you can find him on Instagram as @jg_poet.

Dr Kevan Manwaring is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Winchester. He is the author of *Lost Islands*; *Desiring Dragons*; *The Long Woman*; & collections of folk tales. He is a keen walker and contributes to *Country Walking*. He blogs and tweets as the Bardic Academic.

Leslie Tate studied Creative Writing at UEA. Shortlisted for the Bridport, Geoff Stevens and Wivenhoe Prizes, he/she/Leslie is the author of the trilogy *Purple, Blue and Violet*, as well as a non-binary memoir *Heaven's Rage* (now an indie film) and a triple-author book *The Dream Speaks Back*. <https://leslietate.com>

Lucy H Friend is a poet and nature lover who hails from the fens. Her greatest ambition in life is to live on a narrowboat. *The Wilderning* is her first published work.

Lottie Limb is a writer from Nottingham, and a graduate of Trinity College Dublin's MPhil in Irish Writing, where she studied poetry and ecocriticism. She has written pieces for *Poetry Ireland Review* and *Ecobustler*, and her environmental interests inform her creative writing. Lottie is currently a journalism trainee in London.

Luca Goaten was born in East Yorkshire in 1996. He is an emerging poet currently studying Comparative Literature MPhil at the University of Cambridge. His poetry has been published in *Wild Pressed Books*, *Wild West Press*, and he was highly commended in the Philip Larkin Poetry Prize 2020.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe is the author of six award-winning poetry collections. She has won or been shortlisted for Canterbury International Arts Festival Poet of the Year, Brighthorse Poetry Book Prize, Grindstone International Poetry Competition, Fish Prize, BigCi Environmental Fellowship, Aesthetica Award, Erbacce-press Poetry Prize, Plough Prize, Ron Pretty Prize, Periplus Book Award, Canberra Vice-Chancellor's Award, and National Poetry Competition UK.

Melanie Kirk is a freelance writer, editor, and full-time house sitter. She has a degree in physics but doesn't let that hold her back. She writes flash fiction and short stories, and, assuming its current rate of progress, her debut novel will be finished in time for the next millennium.

Neil Elder's full collection *The Space Between Us* won the Cinnamon Press Debut Competition 2018. Other publications include a pamphlet, *Codes of Conduct* (Cinnamon Press 2015) and a chapbook, *Being Present* (Black Light Engine Room 2017). His work has appeared in various magazines and journals. Neil lives in London.

Peggy Bain is an English Literature graduate from the University of Sussex and an aspiring poet. She is currently working as a copywriter in London and fits her creative writing in on the commute.

Rob Lowe has worked as a farm labourer, steel storeman, progress chaser, hotels duty manager, watch and clock salesperson, student support officer and study and research methods tutor. In London, he contributed to the nineteen-sixties hippie movement. He now works primarily as an (occasionally published) poet in North Wales.

Robert Garnham has been performing comedy poetry around the UK for ten years at various fringes and festivals, and has had two collections published by Burning Eye. He has made a few short TV adverts for a certain bank, and a joke from one of his shows was listed as one of the funniest of the Edinburgh Fringe.

Russell Jones is an Edinburgh-based writer and editor. He has published 6 poetry collections and edited 3 anthologies. He was the UK's first Pet Poet Laureate and has a PhD in Creative Writing.

Ruth Gilchrist is an award-winning poet living in East Lothian, widely published in magazines and anthology. She enjoys being part of several writing groups as well as performing her pieces. Ruth writes on a variety of subjects and experiments with different poetry forms. Her joint pamphlet *The Weather Looks Promising* is published by Black Agnes Press. <https://ruthgilchristpoet.blogspot.com/>

Sarah Davies is from Bedford via Merseyside and has been writing from childhood, with gaps for life stuff. She has been published in a range of poetry magazines and is working on a pamphlet. She is becoming increasingly aware of environmental issues, especially as they affect her children's futures.

Sarah Westcott's collection *Slant Light*, (Pavilion Poetry) was Highly Commended in the Forward Prizes. Her pamphlet *Inklings* was a PBS

choice. Her poems have appeared on beer mats, billboards, in a nature reserve and baked onto loaves of bread. Recent awards are the London Magazine poetry prize and the Manchester Cathedral prize.

Stephen Watt is Dumbarton FC's Poet in Residence and former Makar for the Federation of Writers (Scotland). He has four titles published; the most recent, *Fairy Rock*, published by Red Squirrel Press in 2019, is a crime novel in verse.

Steve Ely has written several books or pamphlets of poetry, most recently *Zi-Zi Taab Taab Taab: The Song of the Willow Tit* and *I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven*. Last year he found four pairs of Willow Tits and an eel - which is another story altogether.

Sue Norton has been published in various magazines and has a pamphlet due from Hedgehog Press in March 2020. She was a prize-winner in the 2017 RSPB/Rialto nature competition, and won third prize in the 2019 York Literary Festival poetry competition.

Editor **Linden Katherine McMahon** is a writer, performer, and arts & nature connection facilitator. They hold an MA in Creative Writing & Education, and have been published in *The London Reader*, *Gutter*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, *Finished Creatures* and more. Their first pamphlet was published by Stewed Rhubarb in 2012. They toured their full-length spoken word show, *Fat Kid Running*, in 2017-18. Over the last two years, they have been an artist in residence for Back from the Brink.

Acknowledgements

If You Want Blood, by Steve Ely, was previously published in *Zi-Zi Taab Taab Taab: The Song of the Willow Tit*, The Wild West Press, 2018.

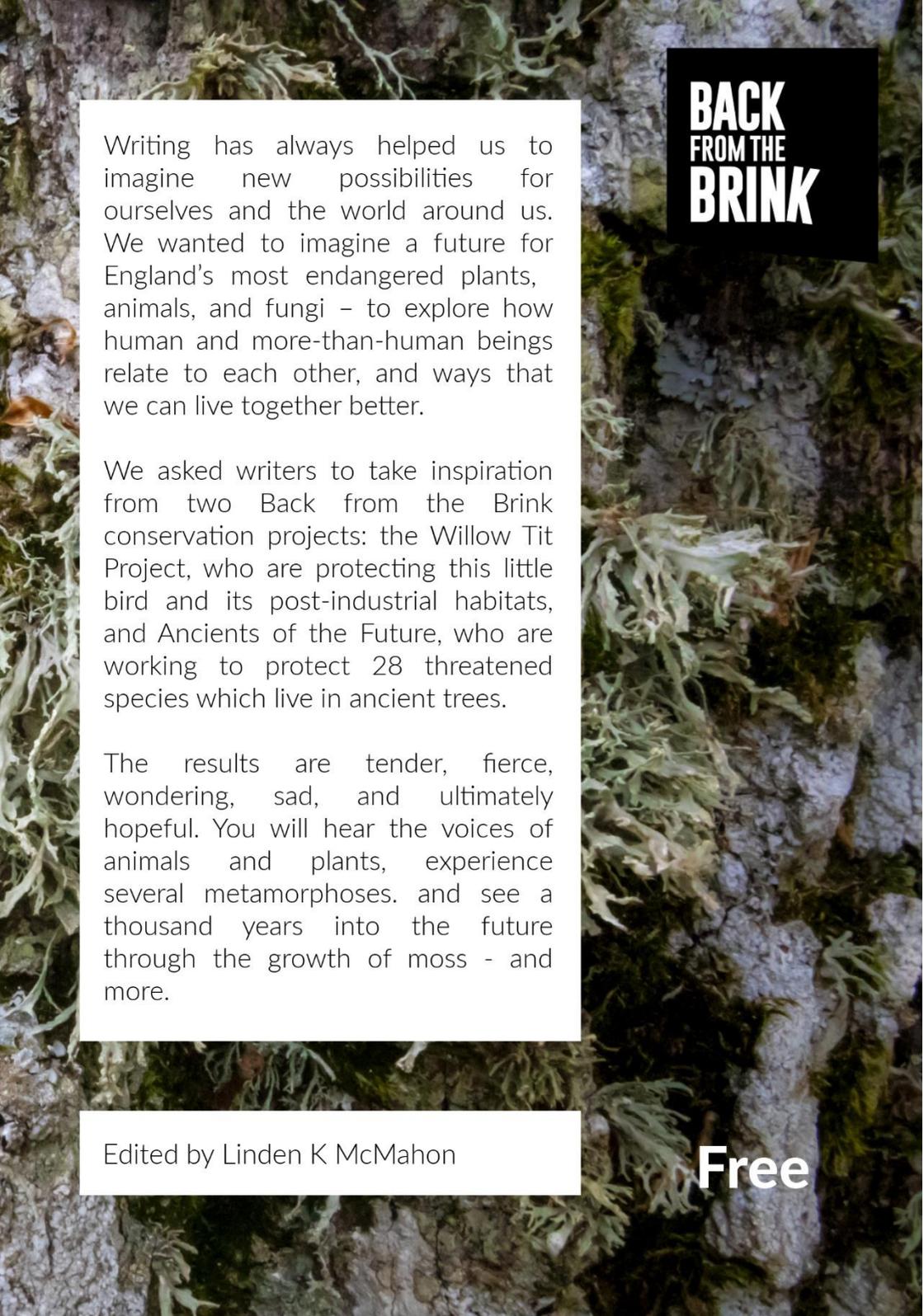
Dancer by Sarah Westcott was previously published in *Coast to Coast to Coast*, 2019.

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**BACK
FROM THE
BRINK**

Writing has always helped us to imagine new possibilities for ourselves and the world around us. We wanted to imagine a future for England's most endangered plants, animals, and fungi – to explore how human and more-than-human beings relate to each other, and ways that we can live together better.

We asked writers to take inspiration from two Back from the Brink conservation projects: the Willow Tit Project, who are protecting this little bird and its post-industrial habitats, and Ancients of the Future, who are working to protect 28 threatened species which live in ancient trees.

The results are tender, fierce, wondering, sad, and ultimately hopeful. You will hear the voices of animals and plants, experience several metamorphoses, and see a thousand years into the future through the growth of moss - and more.

Edited by Linden K McMahon

Free