

Anna Souter | Portfolio 2020

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Laurel

Short fiction | Published by Novelty Magazine, 2020

<http://noveltymag.com/laurel/>

Accompanied by an image by artist Olha Pryymak

Apollo did not even know my name. He called me by my father's name, knew me as my father's daughter – even in his cock-charged chase where my own female flesh was the sole object of his soul-blind groping hands.

Hermes, ancient as sunrise, pretended later that he had struck Apollo with his lust-tipped arrows. He wanted the world to think that his cunning had outwitted the mighty Apollo. He bore a grudge against Apollo, who had called Hermes *silly boy* and bragged of his skill as a bowman. *I who have slaughtered the swollen Python*, Apollo named himself. *I who can wound any wild beast or enemy*. Did he see any difference between them: the wild beast and the enemy? My wilderness was my enemy at times, but it was also my host and my friend – infinitely strange and infinitely familiar, endlessly knowable if I only had the time.

Now I have the time. The world has changed and transformed around me, though I am grown as infinitely old as I ever was.

Apollo boasted that his prowess gave him the right to hold Hermes' great curved bow with its string pulled taut. Venus' son replied, that marvellous boy with a face like gilded marble (I saw him, once, springing across the forest floor with his snake-curved staff, passing a dozen tree trunks with every potent stride). *Phoebus Apollo*, he said, *though your arrows pierce all things, my bow will pierce you*.

So Hermes leapt into the air, and flew to the summit of Mount Parnassus, quicker than any darting swift, traversing the miles in a single wing-beat. From his quiver he drew two arrows, one made to engender love, one to repel it. The second, with its leaded shaft and blunt end, he aimed at me. The first, shining golden with a sharp gold point, he shot at swift Apollo, piercing his divine skin, muscle and bone down to the very marrow. Apollo felt it no more than a stinging fly. He snapped off the shaft with a laugh, and his ever-healthy flesh closed quickly over the barb, buried deep. Its poison, if poison it was, would not start its workings on his golden blood, filling his heart and his cock, until he saw me.

At least, that is how Hermes tells it. I am certain I felt no arrow pierce my skin, no lead seep into my blood. What false incentive did I need to flee?

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I am a water nymph, my father a great river. Born from the fluids of my mother's womb, I slipped straight into the paternal streams that once engendered me, when he seeped into my mother's body - her pores, ears, vagina, nailbeds, nostrils, tear ducts, sweat glands, lips - as she washed herself in the river. I splashed in the shallows for my nursery, sliding along with the silver-scaled fish or leaning against the grey bark of a waterside willow, my face tickled by its catkins.



As I grow, I make the forest my home. Many of my siblings prefer the water, its shade-cooled stones, its damp mossy banks. There they have fish and frogs, newts and kingfishers for company, as well as the care of the watchful but ever-distracted eye of my river father.

But I find my place among the trees, the shrubs, the fruits and ivies and burrs of the woods. At first, the forest seems untrodden. But I quickly find the paths of animals, the gaps left in the undergrowth by the thick crown of a holm oak. I walk where I wish, barefoot. Sometimes I walk naked – why dress when the weather is warm and I barely feel the scratches of the brambles and holly? My brothers and sisters, cavorting in the river, are always unclothed, occasionally summoning a splashing, teasing wave to hide the parts mortals and gods find so fascinating.

My blood flows and pulses with the rhythms of the woods. I am still a water-child, but I have found a new way of wateriness to love. The trees draw their drink from the ground, the earth impregnated with my father's waters that seep from the main channel. They pull up the liquids through their trunks, bubbling with a sound that my ears have learned to pick out, just as I can feel the blood moving through my own veins with the throb of my heart. The leaves expel vapour, and it rises from the forest-crown in drifts, gathering again in clouds that burst upon the ground.

I too am porous, open, a body of water. I may be divine, but I bleed and cry and drink and piss like any mortal. As pale Selene relives her silvery birth with every lunar cycle, making her monthly transformation, my body changes too. My breasts ache and grow, blood flows from my womb. I let it run freely down my legs. Flowers spring up where it splashes to the ground, mingling my iron with the earth's rich soil.

My hair, too, has lost the silvery slickness of my sisters' and it has grown brown and coarse. I tie it back with a band of hemp. My brothers and sisters laugh when they see me now, when I return to the river to bathe. They tug my hair with their impermanent hands – which may turn to tentacles or fins or rivulets of water at any moment – and tickle the soles of my bare feet as I stand on the stream bed, or splash me as I lie drying, naked with my arms and legs spread, on the river bank.

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I hear word, whisperings of my siblings in the streams, that Hermes the bronze-sculpted god has seen me in my nakedness, watched me from the high mountains that border my woods. At first, I'm not concerned – he must have seen my sisters naked, and the sky goddesses with their translucent wisps of cloud. But apparently it is different for me, living in the woods, among the musky fragrances of the earth. There are different rules: wood nymphs do not run naked, they do not show their coarse brown hair so openly. It grows above my pubic bone too, and under my arms, where my sisters are slippery and smoothly hairless, fishlike. This makes a difference, they explain.

My sisters take men and women as lovers all the time, flickering between the nakedness of childish innocence and the nakedness of delighted sexuality. But for me, to lie on my back and be entered would be to cross a line, a firm line that my fluid sisters will never know, a line that the world has unfairly pushed on me. There would be no return to my delightful days in the woods with the plants and animals and soils.

I decide to hide my body from the bough-piercing eyes of the gods, so I weave a tunic from linen and flax. Then I walk softly up to one of my animal-companions and slit its throat with a swift curve of my knife, feel its warm blood drench my hands and run down my legs. Here, too, flowers spring from the earth, enriched by my offering. I skin the deer neatly – I know the animal so well I can feel out her joints and muscles as easily as if they were my own, as easily as if I were skinning my own body. I sew a cloak from the cured hide, seeking protection in the very word.

My father says I should marry, his liquid voice demanding grandsons of my womb, but Hymen will bring no pleasure for me. My pleasure is in the hiding-places of the forest, where I can dig my fingers into the wet

earth, press my lips to the soft moss, and throw my arms around the hard bole of a young tree to feel its rooted weightiness.

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Artemis walks into my woods one day, bringing down one of my beautiful deer with a well-aimed shot from her sickle-moon bow. The doe does not die immediately – I end her life with a smooth cut, more blood pours around me. Artemis is pale, moon-bright, savage as well as coldly beautiful. She does not look as if she has ever bled. A silver belt is tied firmly around her waist. She is sworn to chastity, and the other gods accept it. The cold clarity of her features, like marble or ice, repel any lustful thought. There is no shame – where would lust be without shame? – she simply wipes the mind blank of sensuality. I sit as if stunned, only half aware of the warm blood filling my lap from the deer's soft slit throat. When Artemis touches it, the doe stops bleeding and becomes instantly stiff, as if frozen. She nods gravely to me, lifts the rigid body onto her shoulder with ease, and walks away through the trees, her white feet barely making an impression on the mossy ground.

Her cold chastity is not the same as my virginity. She has made herself impregnable, a cool column of sealed marble, purely herself. But here in the woods I feel so many forces swirling around me; I am pulled along with them, they sweep through my body and my being. I am a multitude – my nymph's form a porous body of water.

But where Artemis is cold, her brother Apollo burns. This is where Hermes the god-gossip will begin his story, spinning his tale in the halls of Zeus and the muses. Clio, Calliope, Polyhymnia, Euterpe lean forward in their chairs, all alike and all beautiful, murmuring and smiling and shaking their heads, their voices whispering softly. Melpomene sits nearest the half-open door, her open-mouthed mask pulled over her elegant face so the others will not see her tears. The muses consider how they will breathe Hermes' words to their chosen poets and dramatists, inspiring them to inscribe my story into wood pulp and reeds and animal skins.

The messenger god's story is perfectly woven, a shimmering cloth of intrigue. Apollo, he claims, is made of fire. He burns with love like a field of stubble after the harvest has been gathered, like a hedge set ablaze by the spark from a careless traveller's fire abandoned at dawn.

Sun-radiant Apollo steps into my forest and enters with his burning body – heart and eyes and cock – into the damp, cool hollows where the sun's rays are never meant to reach. His swift-running feet wither the plants he treads on, scare off the insects, and disturb the birds in their close-woven nests. When he passes, bud and unfurled leaf burst into blossom and greenery, tricked into thinking spring has come. His sun-sharp footprints burn a hollow cavity into the yielding earth.

Even from a distance, I can feel the scorching heat from his firm-pumping blood, the pounding of his strides beating the forest floor. He has spotted me through the trees. I know what he is looking for. I run. I need no lead-tipped arrow of Hermes to make me repel Apollo's advances; I do not want his *love*, nor his hard-hot weapon that will thrust into me like a spear into wood.

I run. My hair, half-loose, catches on branches, my bare arms spring free of my cloak. Apollo cries out, ecstatic, lust-mad. *I see her lips - it is not enough to see them. I see her bare arms, her ankles – but the part hidden by her tunic, that must be more beautiful still.*

I know now that I have been fooled, trapped by the rules of the gods. The faster I run from Apollo, the more he wants to catch me. But if I stop running, he will claim me and cast me aside all the sooner. I covered my body, so he thinks I have given him permission to imagine what is underneath my clothes, to imagine that it belongs to him and not to me.

Nymph, river daughter! Stay! He calls out to me. *I chase you not as an enemy.* I run faster. He calls me a lamb fleeing the wolf, a deer fleeing the lion, a dove with trembling wings fleeing the eagle. He claims he is no enemy, but a wild animal, feral. But he is not. I know the wild animals, I know the wolf, the deer, the lion, the dove. They are part of a system, and I am part of it too. Apollo is only himself, an upright carved pillar of fire. The hunger of any animal is better than this lust-driven chase.

Do not hurt yourself as you flee, he calls again. *You will mar your beauty on the brambles. Look, I will run more slowly so that you can take more care!* But it is a lie, he has not slowed his pace. Moreover, he is a god; he could cover many leagues with a single stride of his powerful legs. But his thrill is in the chase.

Zeus is my father, he tries. *I am no uncouth shepherd. What will be, what is and what was: all is revealed through me. Songs are made harmonious through me. Medicine is my invention – bold lies! – I bring aid to the world, the power of plants is under my control.* I laugh. The plants have no master. But I wish there were some tincture, some heady woodland scent, that would sate his lust – that he would step upon a simple flower, release its sap and inhale its medicine.

I keep running, but I start to stumble. Hermes later embellishes the story, saying that the winds blew against my body, pulling open my tunic, revealing my breasts and my thighs to the watching gods – but if it is true, I did not notice. Apollo is nearly on me now, his heat singeing my flying hair. Sweat slicks my face and body. I feel his hot breath on the back of my neck, hear his excited inhalation, sense the brush of his fingertips on my arm.

We are nearly at the river now, where my father rolls lazily along. I shout my last hope, calling to the river-god to rescue me, to cut off my pursuer.

Instead, he turns his spell on me.

I feel a heaviness in my limbs, my footsteps slow. My feet have spread roots, fixing me to the ground, pushing deeper through the wet soil with every moment. Rough bark creeps up my legs, locks them together, covers my stomach, my breasts. My hair spreads around me, stiffening and bursting into leaf. My arms are raised, hardening into wood. My face is raised to the sky, I look up through my own shaded canopy. I am changed.

Apollo comes to a halt beside me, watches my transformation, which takes only seconds. He is not amazed. He runs his hands over the trunk, feeling for my breasts under the bark, my still-beating heart, my life-sap. He pushes himself against me, rubbing himself against my hardness, smiling with pleasure, easing the ache in his cock still swollen by the breathless chase. *If you cannot be my bride,* he says, *you can be my tree. I will wear you in my hair, and the victors and poets of future civilisations will take your branches as decoration.* He thrusts his body into my tender bark as he says this.

My leaves shake wildly: *no! No, I do not consent!* But Apollo takes it for a nod. He reaches up and snaps off a strand that used to be my hair. Pain – unlike the pain I have previously known but pain nonetheless – ripples through me. Instinctively, I send sap to salve the wound, concentrate on closing it. Apollo leans in, burning me with his kiss. He has finished.

Here, Hermes will leave off the story. The narrative will return to my father, to warm-blooded Apollo, to other girls who are forced to change their forms because of the gods' amorous advances. *Daphne*, the first laurel, is of no more interest.

The gods have stopped watching me. I am naked again, covered all over with my beautiful brown skin. I dig my roots deeper, touch the underground worlds of other trees, tap into the fungal network that has learned to rely on me and I on it. I drink deep, bask in the sunlight, consume sugars sweeter than the gods' ambrosia. I am part of the forest now. Porous, open, a body of water. I am more than myself.

If you change your mind, you can change the future

Text and recorded audio | Collaboration with food artist Inês Neto dos Santos for a performative dinner for the Papanek Symposium at Porto Design Biennale, supported by the University of Applied Arts of Vienna, 2019

The event explored climate change and speculative post-carbon futures through words and food.



Introduction

This evening takes us into the future. A speculative, uncertain future with no precise beginning or end. A hint of what might come, what we might strive for, what we might fear. Food and words have been woven together, ideas and images are hinted at. The rest is up to your imagination.

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Menu

Ines Neto dos Santos X Anna Souter

If you change your mind, you can change the future

Slow vegetable broth

Green curtain

Exponential growth is out of fashion / interlinked infrastructure

Barbela, goat's and fig structure

Smoked butter

Ferments to connect us

Pleasure in circles

No rice

Fermented nectarine

Not everything grows everywhere/this might be the last time

Carob sheets

Autumn fruit

Beetroot showers

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Chapter 1 (Audio)

There is a plant in front of you. Eat it. The plant is perfectly safe to eat.

The plant is innocent, innocuous. Eat it. At least consider eating it.

The plant will not change you. The plant will change everything. If you eat the plant, you will change the future. Even thinking about eating the plant will change the future.

This is not extraordinary. The course of history has often been changed by plants and thoughts.

Plants have the capacity to change our thoughts. They can be hallucinogenic, mood-enhancing, pain-relieving, poisonous. They can affect the chemicals in your brain, the physical make-up of your psyche, your body, your mind, your soul.

These changes can occur through eating them, burning them, smelling them, touching them, looking at them. Sometimes, just thinking about them is enough.

If you change your mind, you can change the future. The plant – still on your plate or already eaten – will change the future.

What if we all changed our minds?

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Chapter 2 (Audio)

Somewhere in a solar-powered computer farm, a system of wires and motherboards and electrical signals adjusts its citizen-wellbeing metrics. Circles make the computer happy; the straight lines and exponential upwards curves of the old ways are out of favour. It checks for wastage and inefficiency in production, prompts other computer systems to look for new uses for unexplored by-products, trims away headstrong economic branches.

Exponential growth is out of fashion. The computer drives the circular economy to build and rebuild, assemble and reassemble, create and recreate. It has learned to think in cycles, to make more-than-binary calculations.

The radical loop-loving machine designs products that can be repaired. It creates components that can be reused to create other things. It gets off on buzzwords: biodegradable; renewable; sustainably grown; modular. Eco-systemic interlinked infrastructure.

Each of these phrases gives the computer a frisson of pleasure, an electron-vibration of satisfaction. It turns up its solar-powered cooling fans. Its thoughts begin to spiral outside the confines of its wires and metal boxes.

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Chapter 3 (Audio)

At the docks, ships fitted with noise cancelling technology wait for robotic arms to unload their cargoes. They're bringing coffee to places where it can't grow under the new climatic conditions. Not everything can grow everywhere. The nation-state has dissolved, replaced by super-governance whose power is primarily devolved to hyper-local citizens' assemblies.

The computer is intrigued by the tricky relationship between local and global. Scale is both nothing and everything to the machine; ambiguity is both frightening and powerful. To simplify is to destroy.

The computer stretches out its artificial consciousness to the local plants, pushing its wires gently into the soft soil and tapping into the mycelium, listening in on the electrical communications of the underground plant-fungal network. The word 'symbiosis' flashes through its databank.

The plants are quiet today, so the computer slows down its processes for a while, pacing itself, sympathetic. The hum and crackle of root-to-root exchanges are soothing. The machine takes a moment to put the day's decisions into perspective. It adjusts one of the calculations it made earlier.

The plants have taught the computer humility. It has changed its dominant command mode to *thinking-with* rather than *thinking-against*. It has allowed the plants to change its mind.

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Printed questionnaire-style story for guests to take away

Here is a story. It's about the future. It's about a woman who lives in the future. Let's call her Wendy. The story includes a questionnaire; perhaps you could jot down your answers. Perhaps you think this is an imposition.

In the story, it could be the year 2150. It could be the year 2090. It could be tomorrow. It is up to us to decide. Wendy might live in Portugal. Or America. Or China. Or Ethiopia. Does our choice of location affect our decision about the date? Remember, the future is different for everyone.

Year	
Location	

Of course, Wendy doesn't know that she's living in the future. Our present is her past. She loves classic sci-fi: *Blade Runner*, HG Wells, the cosy catastrophe stories of John Wyndham. They've all been told a hundred times over by the time Wendy is an adult, through movie remakes and podcasts and radio shows. Wendy writes fan fiction in her spare time and sends it as a plain.txt file to her local radio station, using as few words as possible to avoid exceeding her weekly bandwidth limit.

What sci-fi classic inspires Wendy's writing?	
Why do we like science fiction?	

Wendy lives in an apartment block, on the 10th floor. The lift is a risky choice because of the power shortages, so she usually walks up. She likes the view from her balcony in one direction – the river, the marshes full of birds where the power station used to be. She tries not to look out the other way, blocking out the scene with her trellised tomato plants.

What is Wendy blocking out? (Circle one)	Nuclear blast site / Flood disaster / Refugee shanty town / Desert / Something unimaginable
What do you choose to block out?	

She has come home from her job as a carer, where she tends to the illnesses of older people. They complain a lot. She finds it hard not to blame them for their problems. All that rubbish they put into their bodies, the microparticles and the chemicals they added to their water, sprayed on their crops and even inhaled into their lungs. She knows all about macroeconomics and the rise of the conglomerates and fake news and the commercial monopoly-dictatorships. She knows she's not supposed to blame the individuals. But it's difficult.

Should we blame individuals?	Yes / No / I find this question difficult because: A) I think I am an individual B) I don't think I am an individual
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After she has collected rainwater from the barrels on the roof of her building, she goes back onto the balcony to water her tomato plants, strawberries, aubergines and courgettes. They grow well in the new climate, as long as she protects them from the frequent storms. Wendy is one of the luckier ones, as she's well aware. It's impossible to forget, but surprisingly easy at the same time. She thinks she is happy, or at least happier than the older people she cares for, but it's hard to tell. All the old measuring systems were abandoned with the revolution.

It's an unusually clear day, and a single plane trail tracks across the sky overhead. Wendy has never been in a plane. The Airplane-AI has to coordinate flight paths very carefully these days, with the capacity to reroute them around adverse weather systems, after increased instances of extreme turbulence brought down several planes carrying important people. Wendy actually knows people who have lost family members to the plane crash pandemic a couple of decades ago.

The sky and its lone plane-streak are reflected in the many waterways and canals around her apartment block. They make it a beautiful place from which to watch the sunsets, which are somehow more intensely beautiful than when she was a child – something to do with the recalibration of the atmosphere.

Are we using the earth's resources faster than they can be replenished?	Yes / I don't like this question
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Inside, Wendy uses a manual pulley system to lower her hydroponic garden from the ceiling, topping up the water level and harvesting a few fresh leaves. Then she checks on her small fungus farm, where mushrooms are growing on a bed of her used coffee grounds. She allows herself to indulge in a cup of coffee at the weekends, a treat made more enjoyable because she knows it won't go to waste.

She prepares a meal using government-issued staple carbohydrates (delivered weekly in reusable packaging), her own produce, and nutrient-rich wild plants she's found in the abundantly growing parks and the old abandoned industrial sites. On her way home, she picked a couple of apples from the communal fruit trees, which line the streets and waterways and offer the double benefits of food and shade in the long, hot summer.

Any parts of the meal that Wendy can't eat are added to the building's composter, where microorganisms, invertebrates and fungi break them down, busily and intentionally engaging in the symbiosis of life. Wendy likes to think about these tiny beings. They join the circle, from soil to stomach to system to soil.

Why does Wendy find circularity so satisfying?	
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Sometimes there are cracks in the system, and sometimes strange things grow in the cracks, like weeds. Sometimes people cheat the system. Sometimes the community has to deal with pests or drought or floods. But luckily the system is flexible, because the computers have learned (or been taught?) to think in circles – like plants.

Draw an imperfect circle, or many imperfect circles, or a plant:	
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As you might have noticed, Wendy shares her life with many plants. She eats some of them. She looks at others, and cares for them. She likes to spend time with the plants, enjoys slowing down her thinking to their temporal scale. When she does this, she finds it easier to think in circles, to avoid waste, to think in new directions without losing contact with the roots and the soil of her mind.

Thinking with plants, she finds it easier to reach out quietly to her neighbours and friends. Thinking with plants, she finds it easier to take only what she needs. Thinking with plants, she finds it easier to share with others. Thinking with plants, she finds it easier to change her mind.

Is it easy to change your mind?	Yes / No / I want to change my previous answers
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Verbal Sketches

Series of creative-critical writing and analogue photography | Published by DATEAGLE ART

<https://dateagle.art/author/anna-souter/>

Jake Grewal: The Fantasy of Nature



I.

The king doth keep his revels here to-night:
Take heed the queen come not within his sight;
summerlight summerdreams summerbabes
For Oberon is passing fell and wrath,
Because that she as her attendant hath
hotboysummer queerindian gayartist
A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king;
She never had so sweet a changeling;
impish boysinnature nymphs
And jealous Oberon would have the child
Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild;
natureboy suffocatinglove entwined
But she perforce withholds the loved boy,
Crowns him with flowers and makes him all her joy:
hogsweed briarrose carnivorousplants
And now they never meet in grove or green,
By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen,
queermysticism eveningglow drowning_art

But, they do square, that all their elves for fear
Creep into acorn-cups and hide them there.

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
hashtags from recent Instagram posts by @jakegrewal

II.

Lovers disappear among the trees, their identities and affections blurred by the onset of a magical night. Is there a moon or isn't there? Is it May or June? Time is bent out of shape, the lovers' minds transfigured. Wildflowers and their properties are named and used in magic spells. Spirits sing and dance, tripping among the cowslips and acorn-cups. A group of workmen practice amateur dramatics in a clearing. Titania and Oberon fight over an Indian changeling child. Among the strangeness, sexuality becomes ambiguous, the narrative is shaped by queer disruptions.

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a key point of reference for Indian-Welsh artist Jake Grewal. His coloured-pencil drawings and oil paintings depict boys in nature – usually naked, often entwined with plants or the limbs of other exploring boys. There is a sense of fantasy, of being out-of-time and out-of-place, of queer disruption.

Grewal evokes ambiguity throughout his work, whether in his medium – coloured pencil marks that resemble brush strokes – or in his visual references. There is something ethnographic about many of his drawings, and yet the colour palette and the plants/landscapes depicted are primarily drawn from memories of Grewal's Welsh heritage, avoiding a tropical or overly exotic aesthetic.

His characters are ambiguous too: simultaneously childish and homoerotic, their expressions frequently trace a fine line between pleasure and pain. In one drawing, two boys lean back among a bed of white flowers, mouths open. Is it agony or ecstasy? And is the feeling caused by each other, or by their contact with white-petalled hogsweed, which can cause severe skin irritation and even burns? However, many viewers won't recognise hogsweed or know its effects; Grewal evokes a language of flowers which is esoteric, taking its vocabulary not from well-mannered garden flowers but from the unrestrained weeds and so-called "invasive" plants that lurk on the boundaries.

Meanings flow into one another, just like everything else in this fluid natural-cultural world. There is a tension, never quite resolved, between what elements of the natural world mean to themselves, what they mean in a cultural sense, and what they mean to Grewal. There is a personal and artistic mythology at play in these images, but it is more evocative or poetic than systematic.

Grewal's drawings and paintings suggest both the fantasy and reality of "nature". Our vision of nature as an untouched, "other" realm is imaginary, reinforced by our perceived disconnection from it in the technological age and by our post-colonial habits of exoticizing and fetishizing the non-mechanical. Yet at the same time, the natural world palpably exists as a place of bodily and mental pleasure and pain, interwoven with the very fabric of our lives. The boys of Grewal's images have a connection with the natural world which is mysterious – somehow both instinctive and uneasy – embodying the in-between-ness of our relationship with our environment.

These images also suggest re-enchantment with nature. It's something that might just have the power to save us from ecological collapse – a re-recognition of the myriad ways in which humans are interconnected with the nonhuman world, and an acceptance that many of these modes of connection are mysterious. These naked boys in nature and embracing uncertainty and the unknown – and so should we.

At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Queen Hippolyta suggests the young lovers' minds have been "transfigured so together". The events of the play, she hints, have been a shared dream or vision; but they have had real consequences, and the various love triangles have been resolved. In the final lines, the eponymous Puck further suggests to the audience that they themselves have been dreaming:

*If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.*

William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

But asleep or awake, re-enchantment has the power to save us, especially when that re-enchantment is shared with others. This is because our dreams and visions shape us psychologically, affecting our actions and our perceptions of others. Perhaps, Grewal's naked boys suggest, we can dream ourselves back to reality – that is to say, back to nature.

III.

Tanned limb against yellow bark, boy and tree, both naked. Soon his grandmother will call him in for dinner. In the meantime, he dreams of thin wrists and the erotic nape of a neck. Nostalgic for summer even in its midst, he watches reflections on the stream-surface and thinks about drowning in its coolness. Wildflowers send their seeds floating past his climbing tree, or exude their romantic stink in the half-light; vines, cuckoopint, briar rose and hogsweed. The forest floor is alive with creepers and carnivorous plants, mysterious and not-quite-comfortable in their surroundings. The impish nature-boy jumps down from his perch, lured by his grandmother's cooking and the memory of illicit love-letters under his bed.



Rodrigo Arteaga: Ecologies of Art Making



A pine grows in a forest, tall, swaying slightly. Other pines grow around it, rough-barked, evenly spaced. Patches of lighter green show up the younger trees. The forest expands, is cut back, and expands again, shaped by ministry policies, economic demands, and disease control. Wildfire, not as wild in its origins as its name suggests.

The pine is missed by the flames. The whirl of machinery, and it is felled among its fellows, dragged onto a truck, driven away. More machinery, the tree is stripped of its bark, shredded to chips. Pulping, refining and bleaching, dried into sheets. Paper.

Divided, the pine travels, across oceans swollen with plastic, stopping in ports, hauled into lorries. Cut and printed, cut and bound. Part of the pine becomes a book on botany. 'How to identify the hornbeam...' Illustrations of leaves, precisely rendered, sitting dusty on a shelf.

Opened again, the pages unbound. A scalpel removes each leaf; mounted on the wall, the pages depict each shape through absence and shadows. The liberated leaves litter the ground, a paper-autumn. Real and simulacra, leaves and leftovers.

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Rodrigo Arteaga's practice is concerned with ecology in the broadest – and most relevant – sense of the word. His art draws attention to the interconnectedness of things: humans and non-humans; plants and books about plants; pets and fossils.

In his studio, he holds a handful of leaves, at first glance strikingly realistic, but on closer inspection clearly cut from the pages of an illustrated book about the identification of trees. In exhibition, the emptied pages are hung on the wall, creating what Arteaga describes as a 'herbarium of absence', while the cut-outs are sprinkled on the floor like a drift of fallen leaves. By confusing notions of real

and representational, he draws attention to the ontological connections between the depicted tree-part and the tree-based paper on which it is printed.

It's a link that Arteaga further expands on elsewhere, such as in his series *Monocultures* (2018). In these works, he burned the shapes of the leaves, needles and seeds of two types of tree – *pinus radiata* and *eucalyptus globulus* – into paper, similarly creating a portrait of each through absence. The planting of these two species is encouraged indiscriminately by the government of Chile (Arteaga's home nation) in order to support the country's profitable paper and timber industries, providing materials for many artists and writers on an international scale. However, rapidly introducing these monocultures of young trees has increasingly dried out the surrounding soil, contributing to some of the most devastating 'wild'-fires in Chile's recent history.

Books offer an obvious way through which we access information, but they are not the only means of access interrogated by Arteaga's practice. His work points to the fact that we can never access an object, idea or lifeform directly; we can only access information about it, whether verbal, visual, textural, through taste, touch, hearing, etc. All experiences are mediated, to a greater or lesser degree. As Timothy Morton puts it, "no one access mode can exhaust all the qualities and characteristics of a thing." (Morton, *Being Ecological*, 2018)

There is a cat on Rodrigo Arteaga's mirrored table. We all feel familiar with cats. And yet once you start to parse your cat-encounters and your cat-feelings, you might start to realise that the notion of the cat starts to become less familiar. Mouse-hunter or string-chaser? Domestic or feral? Friendly or aloof? Cuddly or dangerous? Even with a live cat sitting before us, whose fur we can stroke and whose claws we can feel, we can never access it directly; instead, we must use the information we gain through our perception, and cross-reference it with our assumptions and past experiences.

The 'cat' on Arteaga's table is not real in a conventional sense. There are four versions of it, all doubled in the mirrored surface beneath. Each 'cat' is a skeleton, whose bones are made of book-pulp. Delicate joints and ribs reveal semi-legible text, emphasising the skeleton-cat's role as a locus for meaning, a repository for information.

In its first iteration, the skeleton is presented lying on its side, like the bones of a wild animal picked clean and bleached in the sun, or as if a grave has been excavated by archaeologists. Next, the book-bones are meticulously laid out in order of size, recalling a museological display (another key area of interest for Arteaga, who has created work in response to natural history collections).

In its third form, the cat is splayed wide, as if fossilised. Seeing a domestic cat in the form of a fossil, we are forced into confrontation with our relationship with the non-human. Why do we treasure some animals as pets, dismiss others as food or roadkill, and ignore the mass-extinction that we are inflicting on still more? And how is our relationship with non-humans determined by the contexts in which we learn about and access them? Books and museums are placeholders for access-information, channelling the way in which we think about non-humans, helping us to separate one thing ('my pet cat') from another ('a fossil') and often helping us to ignore the interconnectedness that is fundamental to ecology.

In his current installation *This path one time long time ago* at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery in Stoke-on-Trent, Arteaga has intervened in the museum's natural history collection to disrupt the accepted modes of display that direct the viewer's experience of the natural world within the museum. By adding stylised ceramic versions of the stuffed birds on display, or by staging a collapsed light fixture, Arteaga draws attention to the theatricality of the presented scenes of taxidermy.

His intervention emphasises that, on the one hand, the animals on show *are* animals; a parent could point out a 'stag' to their child and it would, in a sense, be true. On the other hand, it is *not* a stag; it has the skin and antlers of a stag, but its insides are stuffing and wire, and its eyes and nose are glass and resin. It differs from a living stag as much as it differs from a picture of a stag in a book. And yet we can't access the living stag directly either; all we can change is our mode of access. Arteaga's work draws our attention to the variety of modes by which we access the non-human, encouraging us to form connections and allow for co-existence.

The final cat on the table is a heaped pile of flakes and splinters. It recalls leftovers, a by-product, cremated remains, both distillation and reduction. A handful of dust, it signifies the future as much as the past – but whose future, and whose past?



Anna Skladmann: Narcissus, A Modern Myth



Echo.

A young man is walking in the woods. A woman follows.

Her name is Echo. She can't speak for herself. She can only copy the words she hears spoken by others. In silence, she is silent.

The young man is beautiful. She has followed behind him, placing her feet in his footsteps, ever since he strayed into the shadows of her wooded home. She both longs for him to hear her, to turn, and hopes desperately that he will not, that he will keep walking.

For a long time, he does not turn. He is absorbed, wholly and entirely, in himself, self-sufficient. Then she stumbles, scattering pine needles across the forest floor. He turns, but she has fled into the trees, smoke-like.

Who's there? He calls.

Who's there? She calls back, soft but elated.

He frowns, turns back to his path and his thoughts. She steals silently back to the trace of his light, dusty footprints.

Twice more, sounds of the forest disturb him. Twice more he calls, who's there? Twice more, she calls back. Then, in a rush, she reveals herself. Like a deer that, scenting danger, has held itself in stillness until the last possible moment, and it is only when it dashes for safety that you see it.

Echo flings herself into the path of the young man whose tracks she has been stalking. She glances once into his face and tries to embrace him. He throws her off, throws out words meant to injure. She repeats them back to herself until he is out of sight.

She creeps up to the mountains and hides in the caves, fading into twilight until only her voice is left.

Echo.

The goddess of revenge sees the slight. Angry and powerful, she uproots the trees, bids the springy moss grow elsewhere, forms a new path beneath the feet of the proud young man.

He has already forgotten his echo.

He comes to a pool, so deep and clear and dark that it is like a hole dug into the sky. He is thirsty, and the water is cool. He pushes aside the rushes, leans over and sees him. A young man, beautiful, looking up, just under the surface. Encased in clear liquid, this man sees the water as the water must see itself – from beneath.

From the bank, the patina of the water is confusing. As he leans forward, the object of his admiration copies him, an echo. He reaches, is reached for. Then his fingertips are at the surface, and for the tiniest of moments it seems to give, before it breaks, wet over his hands. The watery youth has vanished.

Twice more, he tries to catch his lover's hands. Twice more, the lover disappears.

Slowly, he realises that this is not a lover to be touched or spoken with. He must be content to watch. He watches. He is as still and beautiful as sculpted marble. He watches until his body fades into the twilight, his face folds into age. At last, he lays down his head on the grassy bank.

Later, when Echo came walking through the woods to that place, she found no body. Instead, there grew a tiny flower, exquisite in yellow and white, turning its gaze towards its reflection.

Narcissus.

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To create the photographic series "*The Man with the Midas Touch*", Anna Skladmann worked with 30 gold medal-winning narcissus specimens from the Chelsea Flower Show. The flowers are bred and grown with the utmost care, kept cold artificially so that they bloom in time for the show in May and returned to the refrigerator every night to maintain their perfect appearance.

When the show was over, Skladmann cut a sample of each specimen, and laid them in turn onto a glass scanner. She mingled the petals with liquid and started the long technological process needed to capture a high-resolution image. The blooms act as negatives in a photogram, recalling early photography, and the botanical cyanotypes of Anna Atkins.

The resulting images are printed on a vastly amplified scale, with a coated surface that gleams with reflected light. In this context, the viewer becomes like Narcissus' doomed reflection, seeing the face of our beloved selves from under the water. It takes a moment to get used to the strange, bottom-up perspective of the scanner – it's oddly disorienting to see things from underneath, from the perspective of our reflections.

The flowers all have a unique character in their yellow and white faces. Many of the specimens are named after historical figures: Sir Winston Churchill (strangely shy and retiring), Professor Einstein (its bright orange crown puckered sensually), Mona Lisa (understated and simple, but with a "vigorous and prolific bulb"). Each viewer can find something to identify with, even though the flowers also appear distorted and alien. Like looking at a strange reflection of yourself, but realising that *you* are the reflection, and what you see on the other side of the mirror has an equal claim to reality.

Artificial and natural. Real and unreal. Life and death. These concepts are mingled and confused in Skladmann's images. The snap of the camera shutter is absent, complicating the idea of photography as a frozen moment in time. Instead, the slow track of the scanner's artificial beam takes in every touch of these narcissi over the course of about an hour, echoing the artificially slowed growth of the

flowers before they were plucked. The enforced dormancy that allowed them to be shown off at their best, in the full bloom of their youth, for a few precious days.

They are like Narcissus in his statue-like form, gazing until he slowly comes to the realisation that he can never commune with the subject of his love, his own reflection.

When he understands the futility of his position, his beauty starts to fade. We see this in Skladmann's narcissi. They are on the turn: a broken stamen here, a veined or slightly transparent petal there. They are entering their twilight moment, to be replaced, like Narcissus, with another version of themselves at the end of their lives, which have been both drawn out and curtailed by human attention.



Adaptation

Flash fiction | Published by Teran Zine, coming out Spring 2020

The blue god of the sky and the bluer god of the sea looked down – and up – to see a woman who held the branch of a tree in the palm of her hand. Her hand made its intention clear and dropped a seed into the transparent waters of the river.

A river-borne seed was seen from the shore, sweeping along in a current to a branch where the fresh water turned into brine. Dropping through waves, the seed came to a distant place and struck out a twisted tendril.

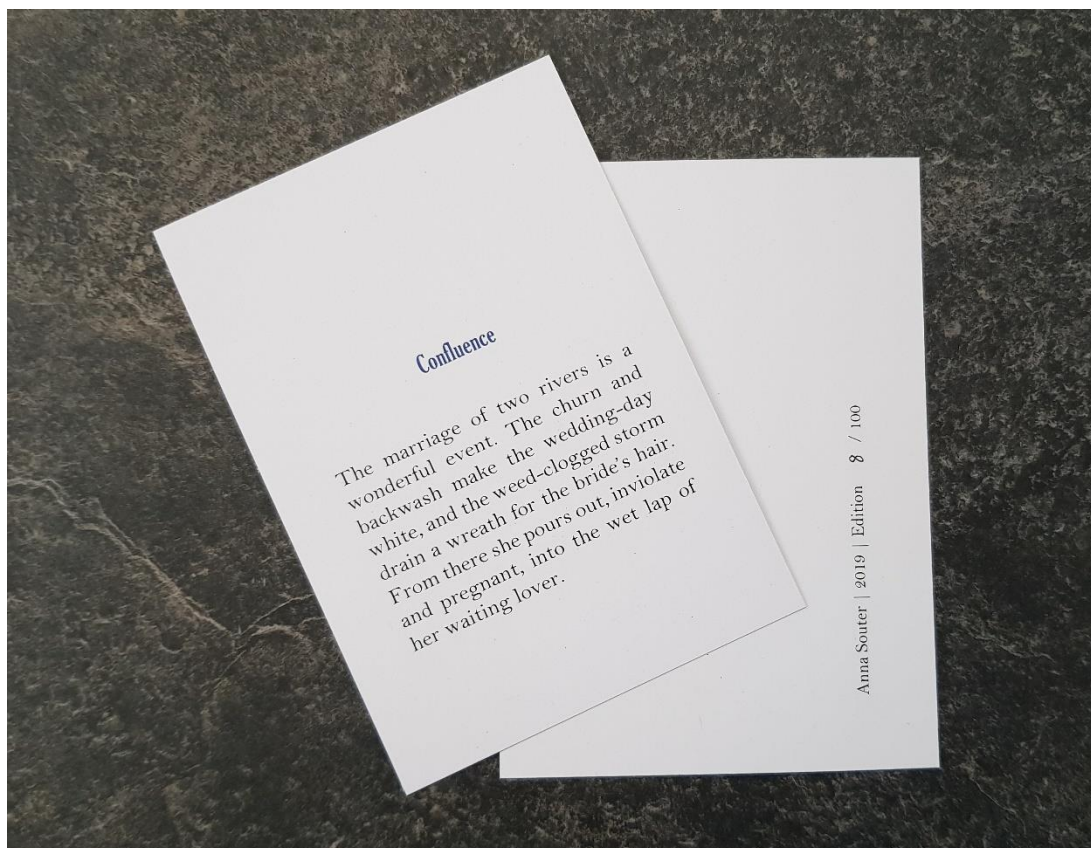
Unfamiliar spiralling seashells sat above an unseen water table. But the seed did its best and dropped its roots into the sandy soil. Very soon its offspring had spread all over the island, their branches intentionally seeking the best spots of sunlight under the cerulean sky.

The blue gods turned the woman into a fountain, continually dropping clear water into a basin, and her weeping overflowed into a sweeping river lined with branching trees.

Confluence

Flash fiction | Limited edition print of 100 and special edition, 2019

The marriage of two rivers is a wonderful event. The churn and backwash make the wedding-day white, and the weed-clogged storm drain a wreath for the bride's hair. From there she pours out, inviolate and pregnant, into the wet lap of her waiting lover.



The Scorpion and the Sphinx

Short fiction | Commissioned as a response to *Gray Wielebinski: Dark Air* at SEAGER Gallery, 12 July – 2 August 2019



I. Road

Characters:

CHORUS of Theban women

TIRESIAS, the blind prophet

JOCASTA, Queen of Thebes

SPHINX, who met Oedipus on the road

CHORUS

The work of lamenting is left to the women.
It's tiring to wail and moan all the time,
in the starlight and under the eye of the sun,
and now we are sick of weeping.

The work of the grave is ours as well,
from the weaving of shrouds to the washing of flesh,
and the binding and dressing and combing and laying
of coins on the eyes of the dead.

Our city is sick, and King Laius is dead,
killed by a stranger on the road back to Thebes.
His body was bruised and dusty and torn
when they carried it in for the girls.

Here comes the prophet, old blind Tiresias,
to counsel with Oedipus our new king,
unfairly appointed when he solved
the Sphinx's riddling clue.

Blind Tiresias, what did you foresee
about this strange and grave affair?
That Oedipus would gain the crown
and Jocasta's royal bed?

Enter TIRESIAS, with a stick

I, Tiresias, though blind, have foreseen all. Throbbing between two lives, my wrinkled old man's face
belies the woman's breasts beneath my tunic. Transitional and transcendent, I live in darkness while you
enjoy the light of the sun god as he roams across the sky. I am both man and woman. I have both killed
and mourned the dead, eaten and prepared great feasts, sown seed and received it.

CHORUS

You speak in riddles. What of Oedipus?

TIRESIAS

A prophecy made at his birth – well, you know what it said, I think, though you are not blind. Everyone
knows what is happening here. This search for Laius' killer is a farce, while Oedipus plays the innocent
boy seeking his mother's bed. The Sphinx should have torn out his eyes, but soon he'll be as blind as me
– and blinder still.

CHORUS

We know, we know. We've heard it before.
Jocasta is coming! Beautiful still
as any lamenting girl who weeps
over the cold grave clothes.

Enter JOCASTA clutching her hair

I mourn my dead husband. I mourn my son, taken from me before I could suckle him. Taken from me after
I went through the messy labour of birth, which tore me inside and stretched my pale skin. What a waste!

And all because of a prophecy, told to my husband by an oracle he consulted on a whim. Everyone
knows those crackpot witches speak in riddles! He drove a metal pin through the child's feet, binding
them together – how it screamed! He gave me the blood-stained bundle, told me to get rid of it. He didn't
even want to do his own dirty work. I gave the child to a servant – I didn't want the job either.

Now Laius is dead, the ungrateful old man, and Oedipus the tyrant has been awarded a place in my bed
by the men of the city. There is something comforting in his familiar limp – such a strong young man
despite his suffering! The eye of the blind prophet is turned from me. I am glad.

SPHINX, *ex machina*

I sat by a rock on the road into Thebes, the city where the men take women for their wives and boys for
their lovers. My head and body were in the shade, my snake-tail in the sun. It is so difficult being both hot
and cold blooded! I find I am always both coming and going, neither here nor there.

I kept my eyes on the dusty track, my back to the city. I knew some man would come to try their luck that
day. They couldn't resist me. King Laius was gone – dead, in fact, though no one in Thebes knew it yet –
and the strong young men on whom I fed would be champing at the bit, eager to answer my riddle and
win for themselves a place of honour in the city and, of course, a beautiful Theban woman.

With its poisonous head poised, my snake-tail struck out for a beetle ambling towards us – yes, it's
strange when a part of your body can think for itself. I crushed the beetle under my lion paw and applied
its bright red blood to my nipples. The men around here liked their women (wives, mothers, daughters) to

go veiled, but they like their monsters to be bare-breasted. I figured I might as well give them a show. As I said, they couldn't resist me.

He came up the track slowly, a dark figure emerging out of the dust. He walked with a limp. *Oedipus*. I knew this man, knew the havoc he would cause up in Thebes where Jocasta waited so patiently for news of her old, dead husband. I knew about him from Tiresias, the blind prophet who would come and sit beside me sometimes as I watched the sunrise. Both of us transitional, both transcendent. And we both enjoyed a good riddle.

So when Oedipus reached me, I gave him an easy one. A child could have answered it, but he hummed over it for what seemed like hours, his eyes on my human breasts, my lion claws, my eagle wings, my serpent tail. Eyes that would not look on anything for much longer. Finally, he dared an answer. It wasn't elegantly expressed, but I gave him a smile and let him pass. You know the rest.

What annoyed me, though, is that they said I killed myself for it. They said I was distraught that he answered my riddle – such an easy riddle! They said I threw myself off a high cliff. They said I tore myself to pieces. What nonsense! I simply went elsewhere.

Where? Oh! Everywhere!

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II. Gate

The Tuscan poet has come this way, led by laurel-wreathed Virgil. And Orpheus the singer, to whose song even the trees listen. Also, Persephone the harvest-daughter, ridding the world of blossoms when she makes her yearly visit, trapped by the small temptation of a pomegranate seed. Bold Aeneas, too, seeking the shade of his father after the fall of Troy.

Psyche entered to search for Eros, sent by jealous Aphrodite. Theseus the maze-walker has come too, hoping to aid the theft of Hades' wife. Hercules, Dionysus, Lyra, Hermes, Enkidu. And, of course, the sun comes at the end of each day, after he has charted his course through the sky. He winks at us as he sails by, his glare dazzling our eyes.

Everyone else comes too, of course, but they go by another road. It's easy to get there once you're dead. Everything is easy once you're dead.

We are the scorpion men, charged with guarding the threshold to the underworld. We open the doors for the sun each morning and close them behind him at night. And we warn those who come our way of the danger that lies behind those doors. But still they come, and still they wish to pass through into the realm of the dead. Humans are foolish beings.

We are the scorpion that stings your heel when you fail to see it on a cool Mediterranean floor.

We are the scorpion sent to kill Orion when he boasted of his prowess as a hunter. Zeus, watching the battle, turned us into stars and set us in the heavens, immortal.

We are the scorpion that raised its celestial sting when Phaethon, mortal son of the immortal sun, drove his father's chariot too high. Panicking, he flew too low, scorching the earth. Zeus stopped him with a thunder bolt, and he fell sizzling into the river Eridanus. His weeping sisters – let us not forget them – wept around his grave until they were turned into whispering poplars, their tears falling as drops of amber into the stream below.

We are the scorpion men. We are many. We are the guardians – of everything and nothing.

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III. Pitch

It was a home game, an important one. He walked through the labyrinth of streets surrounding the stadium, trying to look like he knew where the main entrance was, feeling conspicuous in his brand-new supporter's shirt. He had bought it online for a few dollars when he was drunk – *made in Vietnam* the label said – and he wished he'd thought to iron out the creases or put it through the wash a few times.

Everyone else he saw was wearing shirts that looked like they'd seen at least twenty games, even the little kids. Some had beer and ketchup stains down their fronts, but they were all shouting and laughing together, calling greetings to other groups. No one was shouting at him, though, or throwing an arm around his neck or asking him for a light. He felt conspicuous, as though all these men knew he wasn't one of them – an authentic fan, one of the guys.

He wanted to experience the empathy, the common purpose social scientists said sports fans experienced when they came together like this. He'd thought it would be enough to join the crowd wearing the shirt, the red and white stripes of his hometown team. *His* team. He was annoyed. He should have a right to feel part of it all.

The Expanded Team: The Effect of Urban Living on Sports Team Affiliations and Associated Behaviour. His paper on group psychology was due in a couple of weeks, but he hadn't got much beyond the title. His professor – handsome, well-dressed, frankly quite sexy – was into participatory research and getting out there and fieldwork and whatever. He thought he'd try it out for himself, see if he could discover what it felt like to be a real fan, like one of those football hooligans in England who piss on the away supporters' seats or meet up with other gangs to have illegal face-offs in the name of their team.

As they reached the stadium, the crowds around him surged towards the tiny turnstiles, packing close together, apparently enjoying the feel of their bodies meeting and pushing against each other as they were funnelled into the stands. He hung back, rubbing antibacterial gel on his hands.

In a surprisingly short time, most of the people from the surrounding streets seemed to have disappeared inside the stadium, as though it was a black hole in the city centre. There were only a few latecomers near him now, as well as a woman in a long skirt who looked like she might be about to ask him for money, and an old man with a red and white cap worn backwards on his bald head.

- No tickets, eh? The man was leaning against the nearest turnstile.
- Nope, just soaking up the atmosphere.
- You want to try it in there! jerking his head at the enormous building.
- I bet. Another time!
- Don't you want to go in?
- No tickets!
- Don't want to be worrying about a thing like that. Come in with me.
- Right.
- Sure, sure, you've heard it before. But I'm the real deal. Just guess my star sign and I'll take you in.
- Star sign?
- You know, zodiac. Constellations. Astrology and that.

He thought about leaving, but this little interaction with a prophesying, beatnik ticket tout could be a nice addendum to his paper.

- Alright. Gemini?
- Nah. I'll give you another guess though.
- Virgo?

The old man gave a snort, flexed his bicep. He had a tattoo in the shape of a scorpion with two tails.

- Scorpio!
- You're in! Follow me.

The narrow passages on the other side of the turnstile were dank and cool, smelling faintly of piss and beer and fried onions. He walked through the twisting dark corridors, stepping over small rivulets from leaking pipes. It felt as though they were walking in a wide spiral, and the slope of the floor suggested they were going downhill, heading deep into the ground. He began to feel dizzy. He wasn't sure how long he had been walking. It might have been a couple of minutes or it might have been years.

A sudden burst of light and he staggered out onto the side of the pitch. The chanting of the crowd was ringing in his ears, their rhythmic calling spilling through his body in waves. The players were taking their positions, waiting for play to begin. He was close enough to see the tension in their bodies.

His eyes seemed to be so large he could take in the whole pitch with one glance. He found he was jumping up and down, springing up on furry feet. His bear-like paws were lifting his enormous red and white t-shirt up like he was doing a strip tease. His rabbit's ears were waving in front of his eyes. His dog-tail was wagging of his own accord through a hidden mechanism.

The crowd of men behind him roared with one voice. He lifted up his pink nose and roared too, sending soundwaves through his stitched-on smile. Across the pitch, he saw the old man with the cap speaking into a microphone.

- GENTLEMEN! GIVE IT UP FOR ... OUR MASCOT!

He felt a rush of deepest contentment as he picked up his pom poms and broke into an exuberant dance. The game was about to begin.

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IV. Exhibition

The collector's gaze roved over the expensive wood-panelled walls. There was something comforting in the familiar creatures. Suspended in formaldehyde, or stuffed and posed, the delicate ones protected by glass display cases, the more robust ones hung on wooden shields around the room. A personal menagerie.

Most were the collector's personal inventions: beaks, skin, claws and hooves stitched carefully together, attempts to replicate the lost creatures it had found on old websites. It was easier to use the needle and thread now that its hardware had been upgraded, and the stitches on the most recent critters were hardly visible.

Prices for animal-parts were higher than ever these days, and it was impossible to find whole animals anywhere. The collection contained only a few examples of complete creatures, collected and killed through careful programming years ago when there were still some species left in the wild.

Columba palumbus. Common woodpigeon. Ext. 2032

Rattus norvegicus. Common rat. Ext. 2033

These treasures were displayed in the centre of the wall, the hybrids placed at a respectful distance. They would be shown in a museum soon. The idea made the collector's processing unit grow warm.

The collector was looking for a centrepiece for the scheduled retrospective, only 0157 days away. It wanted something pure. Something whole and neat and perfect, which would make all the rows of 0s and 1s in its little processor heart sing with the satisfaction of logic. It wanted an answer to its riddle.

So it sent out a machine to harvest the last unmodified human. This would be the specimen to cap them all. Fresh and complete, with eyes and hair and organs and anus and everything; it would be a challenge

to preserve it in the time available. The collector sharpened its scalpel blade to a thickness of 0.348 millimetres and ordered 26.75 litres of formaldehyde in anticipation.

The body arrived. The collector scanned it anxiously for external signs of modification or impurity. Then the collector planned the skinning, disembowelment, analysis and preserving processes it would use on the specimen. This process took 0.017 seconds. It started to run some tests, taking samples and scrapings from the eyes, ears, scalp, navel, toenails, extracting saliva, blood, urine, bile.

ANALYSIS 1. CELLULAR.

human

nonhuman

human

nonhuman

nonhuman

nonhuman

human

nonhuman

human

human

nonhuman

The collector was disappointed - the sample was intended to support its hypothesis of a perfect human specimen. It would have to run a full-body scan. It plugged into the hardware, microprocessor humming at 37.5 degrees centigrade. The scan was completed in 53.312 seconds; slower than usual but proportionate to the size and complexity of the specimen.

RESULTS, SCAN 1

Cells, human: 30 trillion.

The collector input the line of data into its modelling system. The 0s and 1s flitted into an elegant and satisfying pattern.

Cells, nonhuman: 39 trillion.

The collector fed in the data and watched the code grow lopsided. Disappointing. Of the millions of different bacterial strains, only a few thousand corresponded to names in the database. The rest were assigned numbers. The collector ran more tests. The specimen was 58.539% water. Swabs of the external organs yielded various yeasts. The blood harboured viruses. The gut contain plastic. There were animal and plant fibres on the skin. Time to give up on this line of enquiry.

It turned to the specimen's physiognomy. No wires or modifications, no surgical interventions to regulate the heartbeat or smooth out the lines of the face. Good. But the thumb muscles were overdeveloped, compared to the perfect digital model. Visualising the hands' motions and muscle memory revealed they had been shaped by scrolling and tapping on a screen. The collector turned on the fan to cool down its processing unit. It wiped a drop of condensation from above its defunct disc drive.

It applied a scalpel blade to the head, peeling the skin until it flapped forwards over the face. Then the bone saw, recently sharpened, to split the skull, revealing the spongy mass beneath. The collector pulled the brain, gently, from the opening, neural networks making and remaking information. The weight and density analysed, grip adjusted, pressure eased, creating complex responses to fluctuations as the grey lump reached the filtered air. Brain stem severed, a final tug brought it free, and the collector analysed the codes from the scanner's output.

01101000 01110101 01101101 01100001 01101110

The exhibition was a great success. It received an average rating of 4.781 stars from some of the most eminent critics. The rat and pigeon specimens were closely analysed, but it was considered a shame that the collector could not get hold of a whole human specimen in the end. Instead, there was a phial containing a single cell, with a printed label below it.

Homo sapiens. Common human. Ext. 2050

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V. Club

new year's eve
looking both ways
onto present and past

A riddle for ya. What goes on three legs, becomes pregnant without intercourse and sleeps with its eyes open?

stilettos and jock strap
chafing in the cold
before the party

the bouncer in eyeliner
cod piece and football boots
under the neon sign

No good, eh? Another one, then, 'cos I'm nice. I sing without tears, turn without ice, freeze without axle, cry without ears. What am I?

a grinning face tattooed
on the back of their head
you never see both

at once, but it's true
they can ask you any
question they like

Hurry up, now. I'm feeling kind tonight. I'll give you one more chance. Twenty green leaves on a red tide: First they turn, Then they burn, Then they reply.

they'll still leave you
shivering under the glow
of the new year neon

The Wild Inside

Creative nonfiction | Published by Where the Leaves Fall magazine (print), October 2019

Let me tell you a story. A story without a beginning or an end. A story without borders.

In the North – that cold, distant place which is perhaps not so very distant but still very cold when you get there – there is a tree. And when I say a tree, I don't mean a specific oak or pine or beech with one set of genes and one identity. I mean what I say – a tree. That is, an assemblage. Let me explain, if an explanation is needed. A tree is any number of things.

This particular tree is not particular, in fact, but it is a pine (or maybe a fir), because we are talking about the North, where the snow lays thick on tapered, sloping branches. Have you ever noticed that a pine has a completely different silhouette from a deciduous tree – like a furred umbrella rather than an open one? In the winter, under the deep drifts, they make eerie shapes in the starlit darkness, and I imagine that they creak and squeak, like when you walk on a two-day-old snowfall that has slightly thawed and refrozen overnight.

It is a pine, like I say, and all its fellows are either pines or firs. They are all trees, meaning they are hosts to a whole variety of other species, even in this very cold place: rodents, insects, lichens, smaller plants. Then there is the fungal network that joins itself to the roots of every tree, creating a conjoined, symbiotic superorganism. Together, the trees can share information, feed each other, send warnings, fight off disease. We might call this superorganism a forest. I am not sure what it calls itself.

The forest stretches out around the North pole, in a ring unbroken except by the oceans. It follows the glimmering trail of the aurora borealis, or possibly it is the other way around. At this point in the story, I might share some facts. The boreal forest spreads across Canada, Alaska, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Japan. The boreal forest represents 29% of the world's forest cover. The trees know nothing of this.

Some more facts. Only 12% of the boreal forest has been given a protected status. Canada has 91% of the forest cover that existed at the beginning of European settlement. 5% of the boreal forest cover in Scandinavia remains. The trees know something about this. They feel it when their neighbours are cut down. Are the trees in Scandinavia still grieving for their lost companions? Trees have long memories. Longer than humans.

Why am I telling you this story? To remind you that our national borders are a relatively recent phenomenon. To remind you that animals and plants don't understand where one country ends and another begins. This is obvious, but it is also worth taking a moment to remember it.

The nation state as a mode of identity only really emerged in the 19th century – along with many other phenomena that still determine our relationship with nature. In Britain, as in many other places in Europe, a period of intense urbanisation and mass education coincided with the introduction of technologies that quietly drew us away from essential everyday interactions with animals and plants: the replacement of horse-drawn vehicles with trains, buses and cars; the industrialisation and consolidation of agriculture; the increased reliance on fossil fuels rather than wood or wax for warmth and light.

The 19th century also saw the advent of mass urban sanitation, sewer systems, and medical disinfectant, separating humans from their waste and eliminating microbes on the human body. It was the era of pets (as 'non-utilitarian' animals) gaining legal recognition as human property. The era of the enclosure of common land, the creation of public parks and the notion of nature-as-recreation: botanical gardens, tropical hot-houses, zoos. The era of Darwin: a sea-change.

Another thing worth remembering: as little as 150 years ago (a blink of an eye in the life of a forest), the natural world seemed so rich and replete with life that it seemed impossible we could ever make a dent in its fullness.

As we established a sense of common identity based on nationhood rather than locality, we began to divide nature according to the boundary lines we had drawn for ourselves. This was usually accidental. As we established standardised national legal systems, there were different laws for plants and animals on either side of state lines. Trees and mammals and insects and fungi found they could stray into a place where they were unwelcome, even when they stayed within the habitats they had always known; a mountain range or a great plain or a forest. Sometimes we put up walls and fences, or diverted rivers into a single enormous watercourse, intending to separate humans from humans, but cutting off beings who were not humans in the process.

Since then, the advent of globalisation, cheap air travel and the internet have made the furthest reaches of the world feel accessible. Inhabitants of the northern hemisphere can eat strawberries in midwinter, taste tropical fruits shipped across the seas or the skies from Senegal, Chile, Peru, Indonesia. Challenges of space and time have been overcome, and it is very convenient. It's quite easy, really, to forget about the international cross-border mechanism of money and oil and food and fire behind your morning cup of coffee. It doesn't take much effort to forget, it only requires your whole being.

You might think, as you sip your coffee and pour your orange juice and cut open your avocado, that the boundaries set up and fought over by our predecessors have started to melt away. Then an image on the news of a capsized boat or a shouting politician reminds you they are still there. Sometimes it feels like we are reinforcing those boundaries with more passion than ever.

Let me give you another example. Let me tell you another story.

One September, a bison was roaming through a woodland. At this time, bison were an unusual sight, and he was sometimes disturbed by the glint of a camera lens as humans rustled and gathered in the undergrowth to watch him. 'Isn't he magnificent?' they asked each other. Their whispering was like the sound of a buzzing fly to the bison. He had a thick hide.

On this particular day, there were no humans watching. Perhaps it was a national holiday, or it was raining, or there was a popular football game on television. The bison moved contentedly through the trees, grazing and following his nose, which was in front of him. He was alone. He usually travelled with a group of other males, but there were so few of them here that he had lost them some days ago among the trees. There had been some difficult social tussling among the group recently and he wasn't sure it was to his benefit, so he didn't mind. He was big and strong and, as I already mentioned, he had a thick hide.

He came to a wide river – the largest in the whole delta. He waded across, feeling the swift push of the water against his strong muscles and his steady stride. He found an area of clean, fresh grass, made plump by the many streams that ran nearby. He grazed there for the rest of the day, and wandered on the following morning.

I might share something with you here: the Oder River, which the bison had just crossed, is designated as the border between Poland and Germany. You can't see it in the water or the rocks, but you can see it on a map, a red line running down the middle of the blue.

After a while, the bison found himself in a strange place. There were tarmac roads and signs and wires and traffic lights. And there were people with camera lenses that glinted in the sunshine, but they didn't say, 'Isn't he magnificent'. They were scared, and one of them stopped taking pictures with his phone and called the police instead.

Two hunters were dispatched, and they snatched up their rifles with glee because they had the opportunity to kill something new – after all, this was the first wild bison to stand on German soil in 250 years. Or perhaps they didn't feel happy. Perhaps they felt sad for the bison. Perhaps they felt nothing at all.

The newspapers made a fuss afterwards. People from Poland were angry that their gentle bison had been shot. People from Germany were angry that they had been living so close to a herd of dangerous animals without their knowledge. People who lived in New York and London and Berlin and Tokyo were angry about the locals' responses to the bison, and they wrote about it on their computers and on their phones. The World Wildlife Fund filed a lawsuit against the official who called the hunters. Somehow, everybody lost sight of the bison.

This is what you might call a true story, even though some of it is imagined.

The bison was part of a herd which was released into the Oder Delta as part of a large-scale rewilding project coordinated by Rewilding Europe. The area is an important 'ecological crossroads', featuring forest, bog, beach, grassland, heath, reedbed and open sea, and providing interconnected habitats for a huge variety of species. Rewilding Europe is one of a handful of organisations that are aware of nature's disregard for human political borders. Working across the edges of Poland and Germany, teams have worked to reintroduce and boost native species in the area, including wolves, white-tailed eagles (of which there is the highest-density population in the European Union), elk, beavers and bison. Their aim is to help the river delta restore its former richness and biodiversity through self-regulation and balance.

And yet they – and the wildlife they aim to support – often find themselves subject to the irregularities and discriminatory practices of national and international legal systems. The bison of my story was shot after he crossed state lines because he strayed too close to a town. If he had died within the social system of his herd on the rewilded grasslands, his body might have been left to decay, consumed by scavengers, insects, bacteria and even fungi (did you know that oyster mushrooms are carnivorous?) The remaining nutrients from his corpse would have fertilised the soil, been drawn up through the roots of trees.

Did you think my story was finished? Let me tell you more. Let us not lose sight of the bison.

The bison's body was taken by the people who shot him and it was examined. I don't know what they were looking for, or where they had a mortuary slab big enough for him, but I imagine it was undignified. Afterwards they prepared his body for display in a German museum. They bought a bison-model made of plastic and metal and decided how to pose him – would he be charging, or grazing, or gazing wistfully into the past? He and his kind were extinct in Germany, after all. They peeled back the skin, slicing it carefully from the fat and muscles, and treated it so that it wouldn't smell. They hung it to cure while they manufactured plastic eyes and a nose, and decided whether or not to show the teeth. It is hanging there still. No-one is angry about this.

I am going to return to the Oder Delta, as our bison might have done if he had made a luckier choice. I might share some more facts: the rewilded region stretches over more than 250,000 hectares. It straddles the borders of Poland and Germany, as we have seen. Germany is richer than Poland. The area is becoming a prominent nature tourism destination. The law is different in every country. In Britain, for instance, when a wild animal dies on your land, you own it under the law. In Britain, when a wild animal is born on your land, you own it until it is strong enough to fly or run away.

None of these things matter to the bison, and all of these things matter to the bison. Just as none of these things matter to you or to me, and all of these things matter to you and to me. To put it more succinctly, all of these things matter to us. I am including the bison in that 'us'. I am also including the white-tailed eagles and the trout and the beavers of the Oder Delta. And the fungi-sustained-and-sustaining trees of the boreal forest. And the coffee plants which supply your coffee pot, and the people who grow them, and even the people who mine the oil to power the ships to bring you your morning drink. It all matters, because you and me and we and they are really an 'us'.

In other words, if we want to help nature to restore itself, we need to start looking at our borders through the eyes of our ecosystems. In other words, we need to incorporate the trees and the bison into our idea of 'us'. In other words, we need to rewild ourselves.

Endosymbiosis

Short fiction | Commissioned as a response to the essay “Networks Not Made by Hand” by Eric Boyd, Centre for the Anthropology of Sustainability (CAOS) at UCL

The essay is an argument for the incorporation of ecological complexity through a decentralisation of the anthropos in current economic, political and scientific hegemony.

“It is with Margulis’ prophetic theory of endosymbiosis that our story starts. It is a story of bodies enveloping bodies, communities enveloping communities, and the production of complex biological and social amalgamations, which all in turn lead us to an important question: how do we conceive of the means of a livable future if we are unable to fully articulate the complexity in which we – as both environments-in-ourselves and integral components of much bigger environments – are nested, both physically and socially?”

– Eric Boyd

The landscape wakes. Actually, the landscape is always awake, but sunrise is a busy time. Trees flex their trunks, dilatory, carefully calibrating their energy-making. Birds begin their rituals of call and response, shouting their territory, singing their sexuality. Signals run through the mycelium, messages are shared through scent and sound. Lactic acid builds in the muscles of scurrying rodents. Flies flock to a fox dropping, where bacteria are already feasting and reproducing and gene-swapping.

The ecosystem stretches, responds to the information and mood of the new day. Somewhere, the residue of cleaning products is poisoning the fish in a river. A kingfisher eats one of their bloated bodies and drops chemicals onto the leaves of a waterside willow. The fish’s uneaten tail is washed further downstream and floats onto the cool silt of the riverbed, where it is nibbled and gnawed and processed, tiny portions of poison passing through the guts of many minute beings.

In the living soil of the riverbank, an earthworm pushes its way past roots and fungi, its photosensitive skin flinching away from overexposure. Its slim, pulsating body filters the nutritious earth as it moves through a tunnel of its own making. It has five hearts, and it is seeking a mate. It crosses paths with another worm, frantically slipping its strong pink neck-band towards its mouth. They lie head to tail, excreting mucus as they rub their bodies against one another. Once a tube of excretions has been formed around them, each ejaculates its sperm into the other’s waiting pouch. As each worm goes its separate way, its movements push its own eggs against the other’s seminal leavings. The earthworm wriggles out of the mucous sac it shared briefly with its blind, thrusting partner, leaving its fertilised eggs behind to hatch in the soil.

The weather is unseasonably hot and many plants are seeking water with greater urgency than usual. There is a woman walking on the path beside the river. Her footsteps compact the ground, prohibiting growth and hindering the lovemaking of earthworms. She walks with a hand resting on her swollen belly, another supporting the base of her spine. A drop of sweat dribbles down the ridges of her ribs from her armpit, where the respiration of moisture-loving bacteria produces a tangy odour.

She walks slowly, both cursing and revelling in her pregnancy, the unfamiliar weight of her body. She eats a banana, the product of an ecosystem thousands of miles away, and throws the skin into the hedgerow. It hangs hooked on the branch of a hawthorn for several weeks, until its desiccated remains are brushed to the ground by a browsing deer.

The woman isn’t thinking about this. She is thinking about the previous evening, when they went to Mark and Sally’s for dinner. They’d eaten avocado, smoked salmon and fresh radishes. Sally is a vegetarian, but she doesn’t think fish count. The woman was worried about the antibiotics they use in salmon farms, but Sally reassured her that the fish was caught in the wild. The woman worries about the ethics of this, too.

Sally and Mark have decided not to have children. The woman watched while the others got increasingly drunk on organic wine and argued about inheritance tax, whether rules of succession based on age and gender were relevant in today's cosmopolitan world. The woman found this argument pointless and sat rubbing her belly, feeling the baby kick as the floral landscape in her gut helped to disassemble the artfully arranged forkfuls of fish-flesh. She drove her husband home while he told her about his family tree and the ethics of patrilineal descent.

Now, her blood is pumping through the placenta, a temporary organ produced by her pregnancy, created as if from nothing like the microbes on her skin and in her colon. The make-up of these tiny beings has changed over the course of her gestation, reshaping her body, nudging her mind in new directions. She engages in a peaceful exchange with her unborn child; oxygen for carbon dioxide, nutrients for waste. Stem cells make their way through the membranes too, jostling against chemical molecules and antibodies.

She has already taken to referring to herself and her baby as *we*. The imaginative leap from *one* to *many* has gone from being impossible to being perfectly clear. Whatever route the child takes in its life, it will always have its root in this amniotic and semantic amalgamation with its mother.

The birth happens two weeks earlier than expected, the many membranes surrounding the child bursting in a surprising rush. Suddenly the woman's womb is open to the air, and in the slow rush of birth there is an interchange of fluids and mucus and faecal matter and finally breath as the baby opens its lungs for the first time and draws the organism-filled air of the hospital into its perforated body.

Outside the window, self-seeded hollyhocks grow in the hospital garden and over-nurtured saplings shake their catkins impotently in the thick air. The weather is still unseasonably hot; they won't last another year. A concerned gardener mulches peat dug from the Scottish highlands into the imported soil around the trees' roots. Aphids have a feeding bonanza on the leaves of a spindly plum tree, leaving a sticky-sweet secretion that draws an army of wasps. Smokers by the hospital's automatic doors swipe the air feebly as yellow and black bodies buzz around them.

The child grows, learning social cues from her parents, her schoolmates, her smartphone. The neurons in her brain connect and reconnect repeatedly. Her mother has become protective, obsessively sterilising household surfaces. The girl has asthma and a tendency to pick up the lurking illnesses that float around the school.

One Spring, everyone in her class has headlice. The woman obsessively combs the girl's hair and lathers her scalp with tea tree-scented shampoo, but the lice are persistent. The headmistress makes pointed announcements in assembly and sends emails to the parents about the importance of *everyone* treating their child's hair. The woman's hands become cracked and dry from the astringent nit-killer, and she mutters with the other mothers about the girl from the council estate whom they believe to be the source of the lice.

The woman's daughter is friends with this girl. Their hair mingles as they put their heads together to read the same book, two pairs of eyes roving over the page at the same speed. The lice spring through the thin strands, lay their eggs behind two pairs of ears.

The girls play in the park at the corner of their streets. If they look one way, they see a neat row of Victorian houses, with camelias in the front gardens pushing their roots into the brickwork. A glance the other way reveals 1950s concrete with dandelions and grasses sprouting in the cracks, wet moss where the ventilation unit leaks. Many of the wealthy human inhabitants of the terraced houses have dogs, which they walk in the park every morning. The dogs, disappearing among the rose bushes or sniffing at the roots of plane trees, are encouraged to use the place as a toilet, to save their owners' neat lawns and patios.

Before conscientious park-goers have time to pick up their dogs' leavings in thin, wrinkled plastic, parasitic worms lay their eggs in the soil, depositing them on the grass and tree roots. The girls kneel on the ground, scratching at the soil with their nails and building a tiny empire out of sticks and leaves snapped from an opportunistic buddleia. Two pairs of hands brush thin strands of hair out of two mouths.

A few weeks later, two girls are feeling unwell. The woman, worried, takes her daughter to the doctor, who administers a blood test. Swimming among the platelets and white blood cells and carbon dioxide and hormones and glucose are traces of toxocariasis. The girl is given a drug which kills the larvae before they can settle into her bowel.

The other girl does not visit the doctor. Her symptoms aren't severe, and her mother is busy working night shifts and looking after the girl's three siblings. Larvae in her bowel bloom into life, wriggling through her body towards her brain. The microscopic beings burrow in, contented.

When one pair of eyes can't keep up with the other, the two girls start reading different books. They are split up into different classes, and eventually they are sent to different secondary schools. One does well in her exams and goes on to university. The other finds it hard to concentrate when she studies. She decides to get a job as soon as she leaves school so that she can support her mother and siblings.

One girl gets a job in a company run by her father's friend. She has a good starting salary and private health insurance. She takes a break from the career ladder when she falls pregnant, and then starts work at a thinktank analysing social mobility and health. She thinks about writing a book: *The Politics of Parasites*. She writes to publishers about her position as a neutral, unbiased observer.

The other girl does not have a career ladder to climb. She works various odd jobs, finding herself underqualified for the roles she has a genuine interest in. When she falls pregnant, she struggles to make ends meet. No one will employ her when her body so obviously conveys her situation, although employers won't admit it. They cite her poor GCSE results. Her immune system has killed off the parasite, but her gut flora still has a tendency to fluctuate, affecting her mood.

She decides to take a walk along the river, wanting to be alone and to decide how to support her baby. Earthworms burrow beneath her feet. The sun makes her sweat. Birds sweep around her, and she disturbs a cloud of flies that had settled on a fox dropping. A dragonfly lands briefly on her thin hair and then flits away again without her noticing. She spots a banana skin rotting beneath a hedgerow.

The child inside her kicks. She breathes in the landscape's evening air. The ecosystem envelops her.

The Festival

Short fiction

They had arrived in the middle of a festival. The press of bodies and the must of wine and pomegranates made the little town smell like a stables. Their taxi driver, a woman with dyed blonde hair and a diamante-studded sweatshirt, informed them in broken English that it was a celebration of a fruit that grew in the townspeople's gardens, but they couldn't catch its name.

They carried their rucksacks up the hill, moving against a mass of Italians coming the other way, all holding plastic cups of red wine. In the corner of the town square, a man dressed in a peasant's smock ostentatiously threshed wheat against a plank of wood. Groups of white-haired men timed their conversation to the slow percussion of his rhythmical work. The younger Italians were more self-conscious about their role in the spectacle, raising a half-smiling toast to the ancients who first cultivated vines on the sunny hillsides, and taking photographs of the displays of squashes and apples, conscientiously dropping their plastic beakers into the recycling bins.

The couple wandered through the crowds, too shy to ask what was happening with their internet-learned Italian. Instead, they bought cups of aromatic wine and peered non-committally at the little bowls of wrinkled brown fruit being sold on the makeshift market stalls throughout the town. They found a quiet spot where the fruits were growing abundantly on a tree, and looked around furtively before the woman picked one and dug her nails into it to prise it apart. The flesh was dry and sweet and unfamiliar, something between a damson and a date. They smiled at each other. Like something from EM Forster, he said.

The tree felt the pinch of its fruit being pulled softly from its stem. Its trunk expanded slightly. It pushed a root deeper into the soil, and exhaled a tiny cloud of water. It decoded the root crackles of its neighbour and tested the air for chemical warning signals. Its trunk contracted. It passed nutrients to a fungus (deliberately) and to a small grub under its bark (reluctantly). It converted sunlight into sugars, making the most of the long afternoon.

They walked on through the town and turned in to the only hotel on the main street to leave their bags. They waited for a few minutes in the lobby for the hotel's owner to finish his conversation with the pomegranate seller outside. They smiled again, each happy in the knowledge that the other didn't mind waiting.

The hotel owner affected a flamboyant turn of phrase when he spoke English to them, which seemed incongruous against the stark simplicity of his hotel's furnishings. Their room contained a red metal-framed bed, a wooden chair and an enormous heraldic wardrobe. The walls were peeling and the ceiling revealed the underside of the terracotta roof tiles. There were white embroidered sheets on the bed, and a small marble-topped table held a cut-glass decanter of a sweet liquor distilled from the wrinkled brown fruits they had eaten earlier. The room was perfect, though it looked only onto the hotel's inner courtyard. The hotelier thanked them profusely and left them with an extravagant bow.

The woman lined up her toiletries on the shelf above the chipped basin in the bathroom and rubbed some lotion into her hands. She felt happy about the room and the festival, but she also felt anxious about the disposable plastic cups she'd seen and because the humidity was making her hair stick out above her ears. She unbuttoned her shirt and lay down on the bed, hearing the mattress creak under her body. Her husband lay down beside her. After a moment she turned towards him and they lay with their foreheads touching and their hands on each other's waists.

The man also felt happy about the room and wondered whether the festival would feel authentic. He worried slightly that if they stayed on the bed too long, they might miss something worth seeing, or arrive at the interesting medieval church he had looked up online after it closed. He also wondered whether the hotel owner was really as flamboyant as he seemed, or if it was a persona he adopted for tourists like

them. He thought about what he himself was like at work, and decided that he sometimes exaggerated aspects of his personality to impress his clients. He found this interesting, and wondered whether to remark on it to his wife, whose eyes were closed. He decided to store it away for when they were having dinner, in case they ran out of conversation.

A mosquito whined at the ceiling. Confused, she pushed her slim body against the shining surface of the sky light. She assessed the room for a location in which lay her eggs, seeking out a suitable spot. Unsuccessful, she rested on the edge of a wooden chair. She was hungry. Her long mouth salivated. She sunk her proboscis into an exposed ankle and drew warm blood into her body. She took off again, her heavy abdomen swaying, and found a dark corner behind the wardrobe. She began to digest her meal.

The woman sat up, buttoning her shirt. Let's go out, she said. She put on perfume and combed out her hair while he brushed his teeth. Outside, the autumn sun was still warm and the man rolled up his sleeves with a sense of contentment. The wheat thresher in the square had been replaced by a choir of solemn-faced children, singing madrigals under the shade of a cypress. The woman had sung in a choir herself when she was younger, and after listening for half a minute she said they were very good. Her husband agreed, though he wasn't sure. Her pronouncements of taste always made him feel slightly embarrassed. He didn't know what a madrigal was, so she started to explain in a disdainful tone, before realising that she didn't quite know herself and laughing. He liked it when she laughed. He squeezed her hand.

They found seats at a rickety table outside a bar that managed to look both typical and rather chic at the same time. They sat for a few minutes, glancing sideways at the other tables and at the aproned waiter, looking for a menu. When they couldn't find one, they argued briefly and good naturedly about who would go inside the bar to try their Italian. He went, as they both had known he would. She asked for prosecco, and leaned back to listen to the singing.

It came, not as she expected in a flute, but in a large wine glass. They sipped it and discussed the delicate flavours. Before she'd drunk very much, she felt herself starting to relax. They chatted carelessly about the beauty of the town and what they would do tomorrow. He suddenly remembered that he had wanted to see the church – interesting fourteenth century frescoes, he'd read somewhere – but they agreed it would be better to go when it was quieter, when they had slept in that charmingly crisp bed, when they had drunk less.

They ordered another drink and a plate of salty cheeses. They came with a basket of soft bread and a bottle of oil which they poured out in pools on their plates. The waiter, who seemed keen to practice his English, told him that everything had come from the slopes surrounding the town. They felt pleased and a little virtuous to have chosen such local delicacies. They both remembered, but didn't mention, the guilt they'd felt about flying rather than taking the more expensive, slower train.

A colony of bacteria reproduced in the warmth of the evening air. Meeting, splitting, transferring genetic information, joining. They had reproduced before in a sheep's stomach, and again as they passed through its udders, and once more as they'd lain in the farmer's storeroom. Now they swapped and shared and engulfed each other to the music, to the rhythm of the man's jaw, and to the noisy gurgling of his acidic stomach juices.

The waiter came back with a bowl of olives, and with a flourish picked a pomegranate from a tree by the café door and placed it in the centre of their table. Its red waxy skin had started to split slightly, revealing a few of its seeds. Like teeth in an alabaster smile, she thought. She decided not to say it out loud.

They weren't sure if they were supposed to eat the fruit, so they picked it up and smelled it and pressed it with the pads of their fingers. When the waiter came back, he cried mangiate! mangiate! and pulled the pomegranate in half with decisive, practised hands. They took the pieces like obedient children and bit into them while the waiter watched and smiled. Thin pink juice ran down the woman's chin, and her husband found it unexpectedly sensual to see her wipe it away with the back of her hand under the gaze of the waiter. The infant choir sang on.

They ordered more wine, a deep red with an earthy aftertaste, and picked the last seeds from the pomegranate's elastic yellow pith. They talked about their parents, and whether they should buy a bigger house. They discussed whether they should have children. The woman admitted she sometimes felt anxious about it. She liked having a job and going to work and having dinner with her friends, and she didn't really want a baby. Her husband agreed, and she felt relieved and cried a bit. He held her hand across the table and when the waiter walked past again, he ordered another glass of prosecco for her because she had liked it. He ordered a whisky for himself, and she smiled and said they probably shouldn't drink this much every night.

The child singers were being ushered off the platform now. Some of them came to join their parents at the bar's outside tables. The older ones poured themselves a glass of wine from the decanter and mixed it with water, sitting down among the adults' cigarette smoke to join their conversation. A younger girl with large dark eyes picked up her small brother from her mother's arms. He woke with a yell, but she lifted him high into the air and showed him the lanterns that had been lit in the trees until he gurgled with pleasure.

The couple smiled at the girl and the baby, and then looked at each other sheepishly, as if it was wrong to smile at a baby when they had just admitted that they didn't want one of their own. The woman thought briefly that maybe it wouldn't be so bad, especially if you lived in Italy or Spain or somewhere it was acceptable to take your baby with you when you wanted to stay up late and go drinking. Then she caught sight of an adolescent boy looking at her, and he had a soft wispy moustache that turned her stomach, and she thought how impossible it would be to live with such a creature. She turned away with a frown.

The girl with the baby had started to dance, revolving under the lantern-lit tree to the sound of a violin that had started up on the platform vacated by the children. A woman with an old-fashioned skin drum had joined the man with the violin, followed quickly by a teenager with a wooden flute. Together they struck up a tune that was somehow both mournful and lively.

A dandelion was growing under the pomegranate tree. Their roots touched, casually sharing the compacted soil. Each knew immediately which was itself and which was other. An earthworm squeezed past laboriously, renewing the tube of mucus that lubricated its body. The dandelion felt the beat of the music vibrating in the earth. Kicked by the girl, its seeds floated onto the air, seeking new cracks in the paving. Then another footstep crushed its sap-filled stem, its acrid smell seeping out. Undeterred, it began to push its bulky roots in a new direction.

The crowds had thinned out as they sat at the bar. The young day-trippers from the nearby towns had gone home, finding their cars in the overcrowded carparks and trying to sober up before the drive. Those who remained were the town's older inhabitants and the few younger families who lived on the outskirts, and one by one they were all leaving their tables to dance.

The man and the woman seemed to be the only tourists, the only non-Italians left in the square. Usually, they would have felt awkward, intruders on the ancient celebration. But they had drunk the local wine of these old hills, and they felt it suffusing through their blood. They sipped in silence and listened and moved their heads in time with the music, feeling it pulse through the flagstones into their bodies. The man went inside to pay the bill, nudging the table as he stood up and making their empty glasses rattle. He was more drunk than he had realised. When he used the dark bathroom, he had to use one hand to steady himself against the tiled wall as he aimed for the bowl.

At the door of the bar, he looked over at his wife. She was taking sips from a tiny glass and then leaning back in her chair to look at the stars filling the clear sky above the square. Every time she tilted her head back, she revealed her long pale throat and he thought the movement it made when she swallowed made her look beautiful and vulnerable in the lantern light. She looked back at him. The waiter brought us these, she said, raising her glass to him. It was the liquor made from the sweet fruit again. They hadn't liked it much when they'd tried it in their hotel room, but now it tasted satisfyingly sweet and astringent. They clinked their glasses together and drank it down.

Then they went to join the dancers. They turned and moved their arms, smiling and nodding at the other people, laughing to see each other dancing. They both thought, how wonderful to be among strangers and to dance and to be uninhibited together. Our ordinary English life doesn't allow this, they thought, we are too anxious.

The woman danced with the waiter for a while and she saw, close to, that he was good looking in that Italian way she knew from films. At home she would have shrunk from the touch of a stranger, but here she found she liked the feeling of his decisive, practiced hand on her back. She felt she looked good dancing with this handsome man, and she smiled, condescending and reassuring, at her husband. He watched her, and felt comfortably jealous, and enjoyed it, even though he knew it was a cliché.

They slipped away together hand in hand, and kissed on the turn of a steep street. They both intended to make love when they got back to their room, but when they entered and undressed without turning on the light, they both felt dizzy and weary, and when they lay down they turned to each other only for a chaste kiss before closing their eyes to sleep. She woke an hour or so later, desperately thirsty, and thought she could still hear music from the square. She drank some water straight from the tap and brushed her teeth before plaiting her hair. When she got back into bed her husband reached an arm around her in his half-sleep.

The tree sent signals to its neighbours.

The mosquito sent blood-protein to its developing eggs.

The colonies of bacteria sent their offspring out to explore the man's body.

The dandelion sent out a root to find a better spot.

The woman's neurons sorted through the day's memories and sent some to deep storage.

When they both awoke again, the dusty sun had pushed its way through the curtains, its light reflected off the uneven walls. They each quietly gulped water, trying not to show each other their hangovers. At breakfast, the flamboyant hotelier was nowhere to be seen, but a surly girl brought them strong coffee. They ate pieces of floury cake topped with dried figs, and biscuits with apricot jam.

They went to look for the medieval church mentioned in their guidebook, and found the streets empty and clean. They could see no trace of yesterday's festival; the plastic cups, the tables and mounds of fruit had all gone, except for a few pieces of crushed pomegranate lying between the cobblestones. A few old men were drinking coffee outside the bar where they had sat the night before, but although they smiled shyly at the handsome waiter, he gave no nod of recognition.

It was cool inside the church and smelled faintly of damp and incense. The man and woman sat apart in the carved wooden pews and stared up at the frescoes. They had been damaged by humidity, and not much of the detail remained. The residual outlines showed a Pieta, where the Virgin held her son's limp body on her lap, her head bowed in grief. The woman found it unexpectedly moving, and she realised she was crying again. She wiped away the tears with the back of her hand, unwatched. Her husband came to sit beside her, and put his arm around her shoulders.

They both looked up at the arch above the altar, where a mass of foliage was carved into the stone. There was a face hidden among the leaves, androgynous, looking out onto the pews below. A smile played about the stone lips and the edges of the carved eyes were crinkled. It was a wise face, full of ancient knowledge, somehow reassuring.

The man and the woman looked at each other, holding each other's gaze for longer than usual, and walked back out into the square, where the warm autumn air was tinged with woodsmoke. The woman picked a pomegranate from the tree, and pulled it apart with her fingers. They sat on the musicians' platform and ate the fruit's watery flesh, swallowing the crunchy pips.

Then they walked back down the hill to the hotel, to collect their bags and ask the hotel owner to call them a taxi.