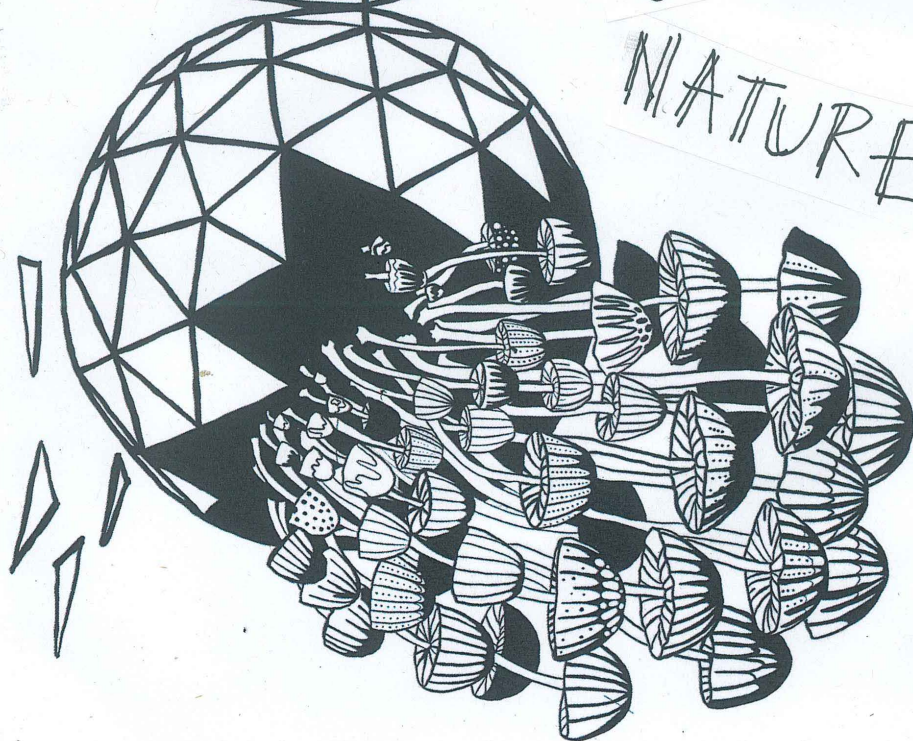




STRANGE

NATURES



Strange Natures: An invitation

These are strange days.

The air is heavy with crisis. We can feel the pin-prickles of static from frictions as we rub against invisible thresholds. For some, there is a sense of being stuck in what some describe as a long present, made weird as near-futures interact with revenants from the past.

We walk landscapes that feel out of place, out of space, out of time, eerie, strewn with ruins, haunted by traumas - life-worlds foreclosed, failed promises of progress, the spectres of imagined futures that never materialised.

A fascination with the *strange* is a fascination with the ineffable, for that which lies beneath the murky surface, behind the locked door, in the neglected corners, shrouded in shadows. But for some of us, the strangeness of these times can frustrate *rational* ways of experiencing time and space, frustrate the sense of human control, of mastery, that underlie big stories we've always been told about growth, development and nature.

Ruptures are ever more difficult to hide, and as the shadows get longer, uncertainties grow, and we hear the monsters' claws scratching at the door... the strange can be terrifying. But abolishing the rational, embracing the strange can open locked doors, make peace with the shadows and open up not just portals to other worlds but transform how we see our own.

Strange Natures is a collection of reflections from different places, times and vantage points, different ways of noticing, seeing, listening and inhabiting reality. *Strange Natures* invites us to abolish the rational, abandon control and to be fascinated, to find re-enchantment, to embrace the weirdness of the world as we know it, and accept the inevitability of transformation in a changing, vastly more-than-human universe of possibilities.

See more at

futurenatures.org/season-strange-natures



THE INFINITE VARIETY

The Infinite Variety

The Infinite Variety

The Infinite Variety

The Infinite Variety

Hunted

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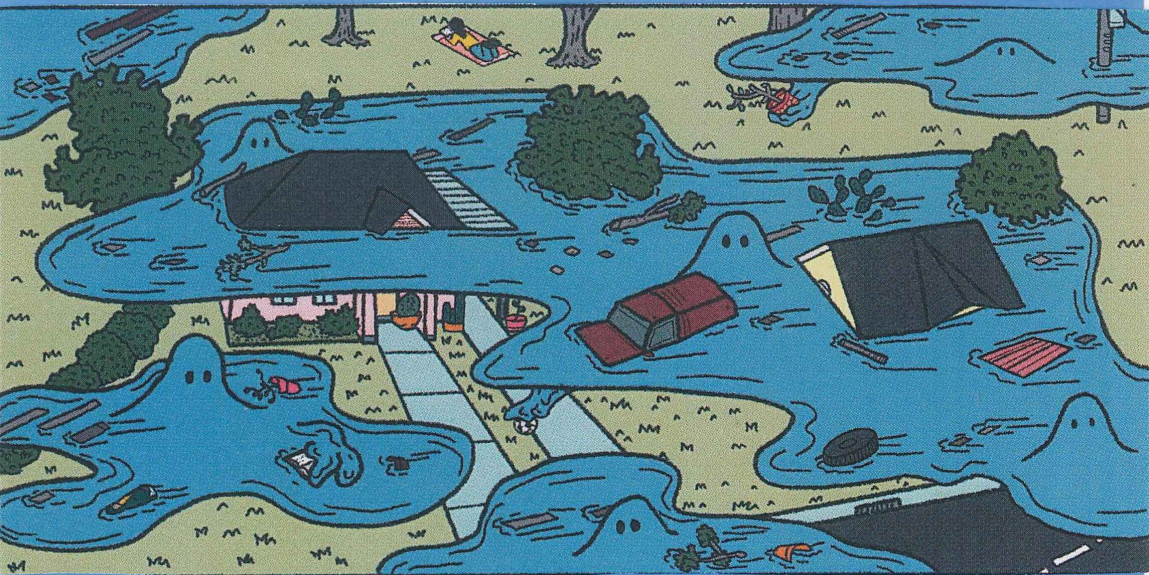
haunted floodplains of san felipe

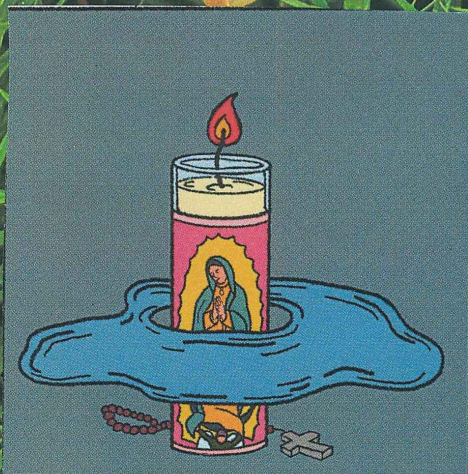
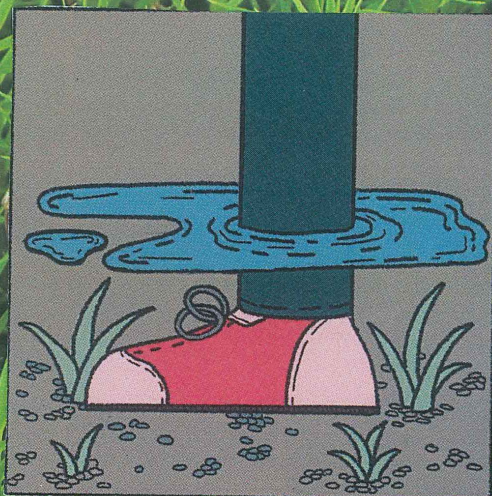
by Jorge Losoya

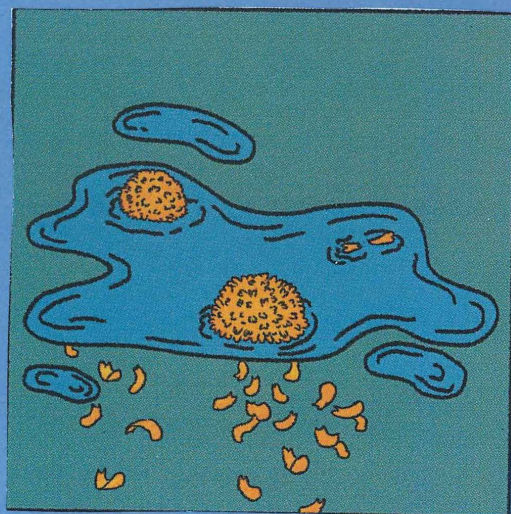
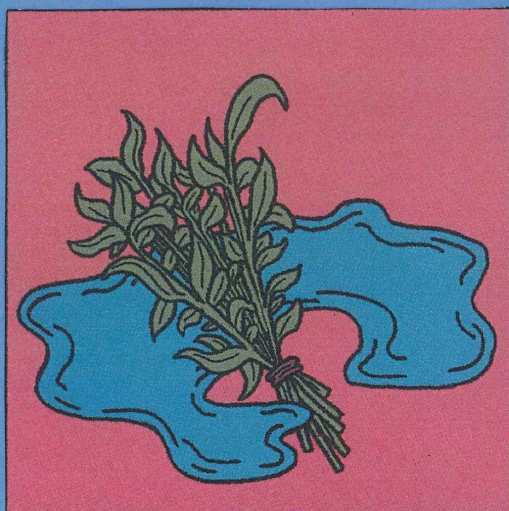
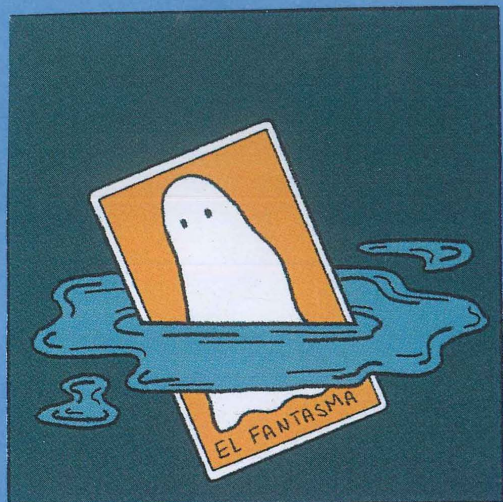
My own hometown is no stranger to disastrous floods. The community of San Felipe in Del Rio, Texas continues to be haunted by the flood of 1998. These artworks are my attempt to visualize the way floodplains are haunted by past and future floods.

Although the landscape may not be flooded in the moment, those who have experienced them can see the specters of the floods. These ghosts manifest for communities that repeatedly flood. They exist in the memories, stories, and nightmares of the community.

My artwork also visualizes the grassroots attempts to exorcise the land of the floods. By taking action in disaster recovery and mitigation, communities enact measures to dispel the haunting of the flood and increase their resilience.







Singing bullfrogs of Sahjay Van

by Susan Haris

The most famous frog poem in modern Indian poetry in English is perhaps *The Frog and the Nightingale* by Vikram Seth. In the poem, a frog in Bingle Bog relentlessly croaks every night, much to the annoyance of other creatures. Their efforts to silence him prove futile until a nightingale arrives and captivates the audience with her beautiful songs, earning their applause. The frog is embittered by her success and manipulates her by offering to mentor her in singing, insisting her song needs improvement and should follow current trends. Under the frog's strenuous training, the nightingale ultimately pushes herself to exhaustion and dies. The frog is once again the sole singer of Bingle Bog.

In the poem, the other animal denizens of Bingle Bog loathe the frog's singing and appreciate the nightingale's melodies. The frog, too, is impressed by the nightingale's voice, which is why he sets his evil plan into motion. Unfortunately, the poor nightingale remains unaware of how good her singing is.

The poem is often read allegorically as offering a moral lesson about not allowing others to take advantage of our insecurities and how criticism can stifle talent. Very little is said about the frog himself—the progenitor of the cutting, ultimately fatal, criticism—or the multiple modes of multispecies communication in the poem. What if there was a failure in multispecies communication that prevented the nightingale from fully grasping the wonder of her audience? What if there were another nightingale in the poem or a benevolent frog?

The problem humans face as species is this: I am open only to some species, and only some species are open to me. In other words, we may connect only to some members of a particular species and not to others and vice versa. We expect to connect with dogs but not say, spiders.

What can frustrate such assumptions? What must an animal do to cast doubt about whether we have judged them too quickly? How must humans respond to such a gesture should an animal make it? What strange things must happen?

Animals are othered because we don't speak the same language, but we do have secret and open friendships with domesticated animals. There are other common contract-languages such as work and companionship that enables us to translate what animals are saying. As the translators, we have an unparalleled power of interpretation; we can even say they are not saying anything at all. This is also evidenced in the lack of consensus in what constitutes as animal sentence or animal abuse.

This essay is concerned with an associated challenge: How to subjectify those beings entirely different from us?

On a rainy morning of July 2023, I had my first encounter with Indian bullfrogs, *Hoplobatrachus tigerinus*, in the city forest of Sanjay Van, located in South Delhi. Indian bullfrogs appear quite ordinary until the mating season arrives. These frogs, typically green with shades of blue and brown, transform into a lifejacket yellow colour with Persian blue vocal sacs. They are so gaudy that they do not look real.

On top of that, there's their sounds. You could say we heard them before we saw them.

Calvin and I traced the raucous calls to a swamp where they were everywhere. When we ventured closer to the source of the commotion, I realised that this site was not only the site of the mating calls but also the site of sex.

I hope I knew more about tadpoles as a child, but my personal knowledge of frogs had shrunk so much in the last few years that I only remembered that they hop and croak. I had to look up to corroborate what I saw: males gather at breeding sites, calling loudly to attract females. Once a female chooses a mate, the male clasps onto her in a behaviour known as amplexus. During amplexus, the male continues to call, and the female lays her eggs. The male fertilizes the eggs externally as they are released. These events unfolded in the way biology texts describe so simply and elegantly that they almost sound routine.

Except what was happening in the swamp was simultaneously elegant and frenzied. What I was seeing was an explosive breeding event. Explosive breeding is when animals like frogs gather for a few days in large numbers in a particular water source, often formed by rainfall, to reproduce. Indian bullfrogs are quite a large species that can grow to be 17 centimetres (6.7 inches) in size. They are the largest frog species in India.

As we watched, the male frogs were frantically trying to get the attention of the females, and skirmishes arose when some kicked others or tried to stay on top of the female frogs in the water. They executed perfect frog kicks, and you could see clearly that they were clasping the ladies underneath in a perfect grip. The swamp was filled with mated couples and single males desperately swimming around, searching for an opportunity. Everyone looked very serious, and the gravitas was reflected in the pools of water covered in eggs.

But what to make of these strange phenomena and their stranger biological characterisations? Are frogs following the laws of nature to madly, wildly reproduce? There seems to be two levels at which meanings could flow. On one hand, these anurans are opportunistic, explosive breeders, exhibiting what is decidedly a species characteristic. On the other hand, the very words opportunistic and explosive suggest an ambition and energy that leaves something open for interpretation, and which does not enervate their social worlds and make them mere followers of biological laws that we have deduced and inferred.

They knew we were there, of course. They would go very quiet when we got too close, and it was only when we retreated that they would start up again. The sounds, it could be said, were affected by our presence. But that is not really a personal connection, because in a

way, they are responding to humanity as a species and predator. Often, in social sciences, we are thinking of animals as species, when sometimes I think what we want are personal connections. Something inalienably alien with another species. That somehow seems to make things even more real, making clear what is really at stake, bringing to us the possibility of communication and subjectivity. Now that would make possible ethics; but instead, we have to confront groups, taxa, species.

Anna Tsing (2013) discusses more-than-human sociality that includes both animal and human sociality. She is resisting precisely a tendency to make animal social worlds look nonexistent and to attribute a dynamic agency and intentionality to only the human. By sociality, Tsing seems to refer to those connections and social relations that are overlooked in our notions of sociality and our social histories. Her main point is that if we are trying to understand shared social worlds in which both humans and animals live, then it would be useful to bring together ethnography and natural history to understand how other species contribute to a common more-than-human sociality where animals are not simply non-reactive.

We watched the frogs for a while, documenting the scene with photos and videos. Just before leaving, Calvin, on a whim, recorded their vocalizations and played them back using a portable speaker he happened to have with him. To our horror and great delight, the frogs responded to our playback.

As we played the recording, the bog filled with echo upon echo, with the frogs starting to make their frantic mating calls alongside their own already recorded sounds that we were playing back to them. The effect was orchestral, as the frogs seemed to be attempting to match the loudness of the speaker. We felt completely surrounded, and I half-expected them to start moving toward us, much like in a scene from a zombie movie. Instead, we were part of this acoustic community, if only for a few moments.

Abhijith, who studies frogs (see 2023), told me that it is possible they were making louder sounds to appear louder to the females. Perhaps—but perhaps it was a form of communication. Earlier, when I had attempted to approach the frogs for a closer look, they had quickly hopped away, showing no desire for physical proximity. However, when we stood at the very same spot and played their sounds back to them, they responded. It was an intense harmony, and the music seemed to vibrate in the air.

We repeated this interaction several times to ensure it wasn't a mere coincidence or a one-time event, but we weren't really doing it for replicability. We repeated it because it was astounding every time when there was pin drop silence, and then all of a sudden, we heard their earnest response to us when we played their music back to them.

What struck me was that it was a collective response—species communicating with species, as it wasn't just one or two frogs; it was all the frogs in the bog. The uncharitable explanation would be that the frogs thought there were other frogs and did not recognise their own voices, or that it was another characteristic of this acoustic community that did not differentiate between technologically mediated sounds and other sounds in their single-minded focus on drowning out other sounds in the "cocktail party"[1] to make themselves heard. Yet another response to this mirroring would be to see it a delicate connection that is forged through subjectivities.

No doubt, our subjectivities were involved. I was very happy. Calvin and I were thrilled and their response to us was better than us simply watching them. I distinctly remember Calvin saying, "wait, let me try something" before he took out the speaker to record their sounds and play them back, and then the frogs singing with their bulging blue throats. If I close my eyes, I can even imagine the sounds.

But what of the frogs themselves? In a multispecies history that acknowledges more-than-human sociality, it is possible to trace their presence there to the socio-political history of the city forest of Sanjay Van. This forest provides a sanctuary for myriad animals in the heart of an unbelievably polluted Delhi and the rugged terrain of the Aravalli range that the forest is part of, which provides space for the pools to form once it rains. Further, the forest has well-maintained paths for the citizenry who come for morning and evening walks, with the sylvan depths providing the animal denizens with privacy. The sociality, in the human and animal use of this space, overlaps. But is it enough to elevate their social worlds with sociality? Could they also be subjective social worlds?

In a poem (2022) on this question, I considered how multispecies ethnography pivots on the ethnographer's humanness to narrate interspecies relationships, and I suggested that perhaps in our thick descriptions we also ought to speak about the violence that animals suffer in addition to the social histories that they play central roles in. That is only possible if we grant animal worlds subjectivities, and my poem was an attempt to do that. If depriving them of sociality renders animals nonreactive, depriving them of subjectivity also similarly renders them nonresponsive. Or, to put it another way, if sociality equips animals as members of our common social worlds, then subjectivity equips them as members of our affective worlds.

Despret (2008) points out that it is as a "we" that we speak for animals, and that this "we" is human which is not only representing animals but also act as representative. An example of this is a description of frog behaviour which also tells us what such behaviour means. Hence, the power is in our hands to talk about animal subjectivities at all.

When we came across another pool of water with the bullfrogs, we recorded them and played it back to them—and this time, they were all quiet. This group of frogs had no truck with us. This meant that the earlier response was group-specific, occurring in that specific place and time, in our presence. Our inability to elicit a response from the second group of similarly aroused Indian bullfrogs made our first encounter so much important—so much stranger and more magical.

To return to the frog poem that I opened with: it abounds in animal subjectivities, evident from the words that are used. Other creatures loathe the frog's voice and they are enraptured by the nightingale's voice. Everyone expresses and communicates their feelings to each other, despite the frog's deception of the nightingale. In the poem, the plot emanates from the structure of attributed subjectivities that determine who is jealous, who is good, who is evil and so on. More importantly, it is the structure of subjectivities that makes communication happen in the poem and move the story forward.

Now, I don't know if I'll go so far as to say the bullfrogs I met felt these emotions toward us—but in the glimmerings of their response, I am inclined to use sympathetic adjectives.

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- Despret, Vinciane (2008) "The becomings of subjectivity in animal worlds." *Subjectivity* 23: 123-139.
- Haris, Susan (2022) How to Perform a Reality Check: Multispecies Ethnography and Becoming Human. *Anthropology and Humanism* 47(2): 434-437
- Tsing, Anna L. (2013) More than human sociality. *Anthropology and Nature* 14(1): 27-42.

About the author

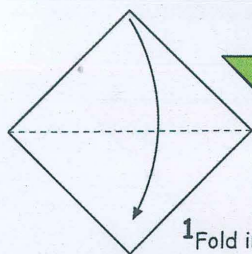
Susan Haris is a multispecies ethnographer and the cofounder of the Indian Animal Studies Collective.

Notes

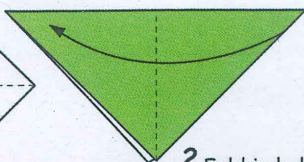
[1] The cocktail party problem refers to the difficulty of trying to understand multiple conversations at a busy party where the challenge is that of separating and identifying individual sound sources in a mixture of overlapping voices.



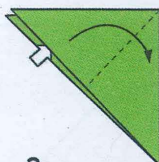
LET'S MAKE A FROG



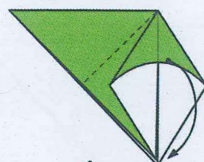
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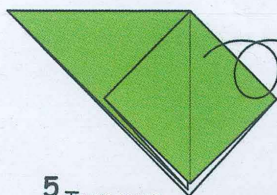
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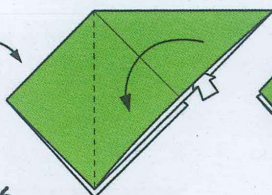
3 Open the → part



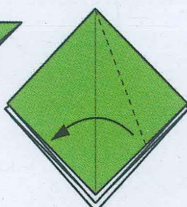
4 Flatten to square



5 Turn over



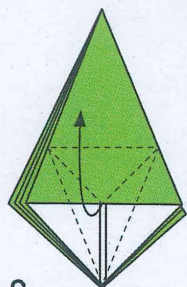
6 Follow the same step as 3 and 4



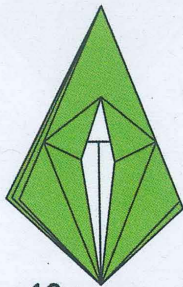
7 Fold in the dotted line



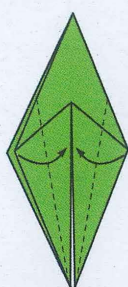
8 Fold others in the dotted line, too



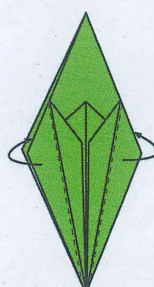
9 Make crease and fold forward in the dotted line



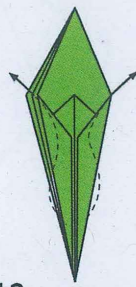
10 Flatten



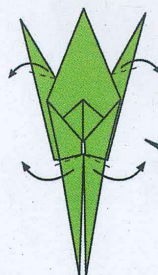
11 Fold forward in the dotted line



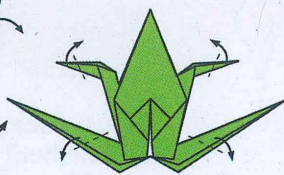
12 Follow the same steps to the others



13 Pocket fold in the dotted line



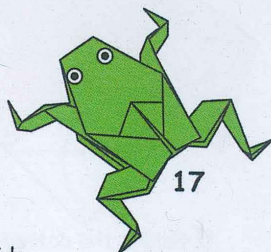
14 Pocket fold



15 Pocket fold



16 Fold the head inside. Pocket fold the legs



Finished!

Black Water Crossing

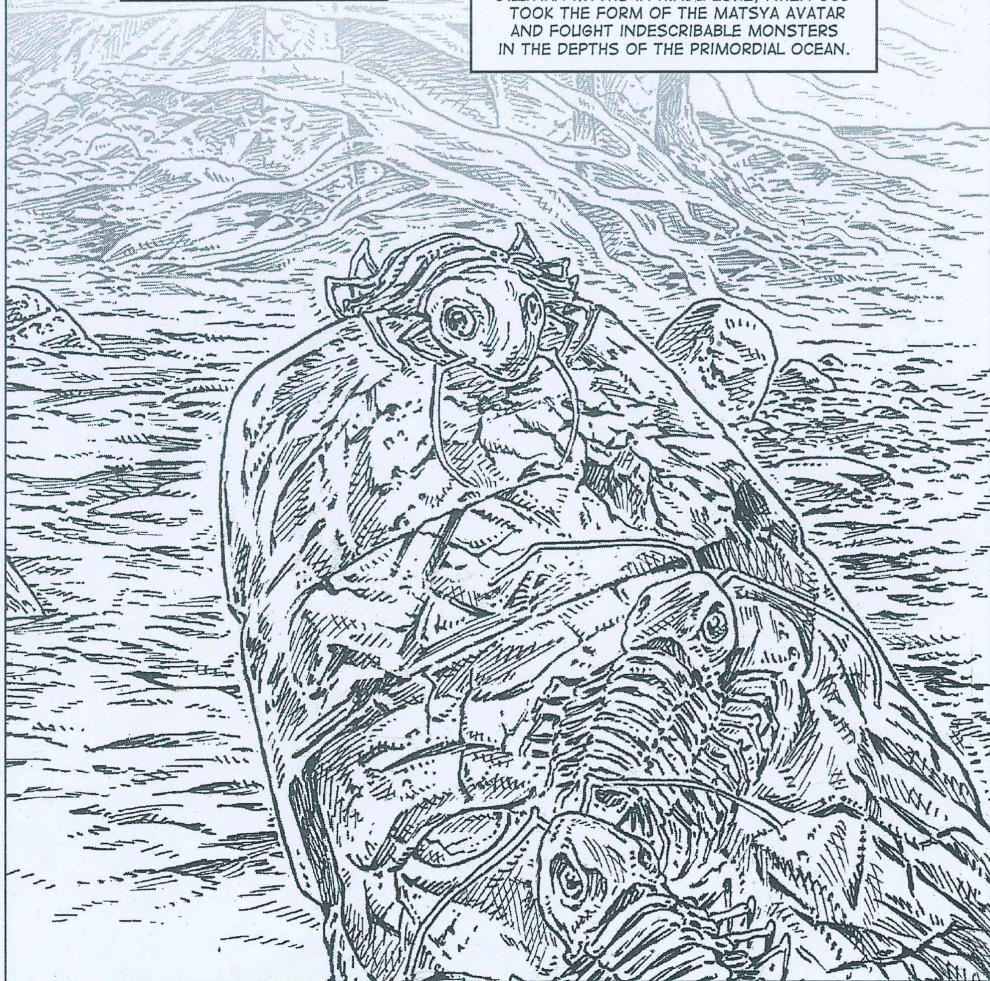
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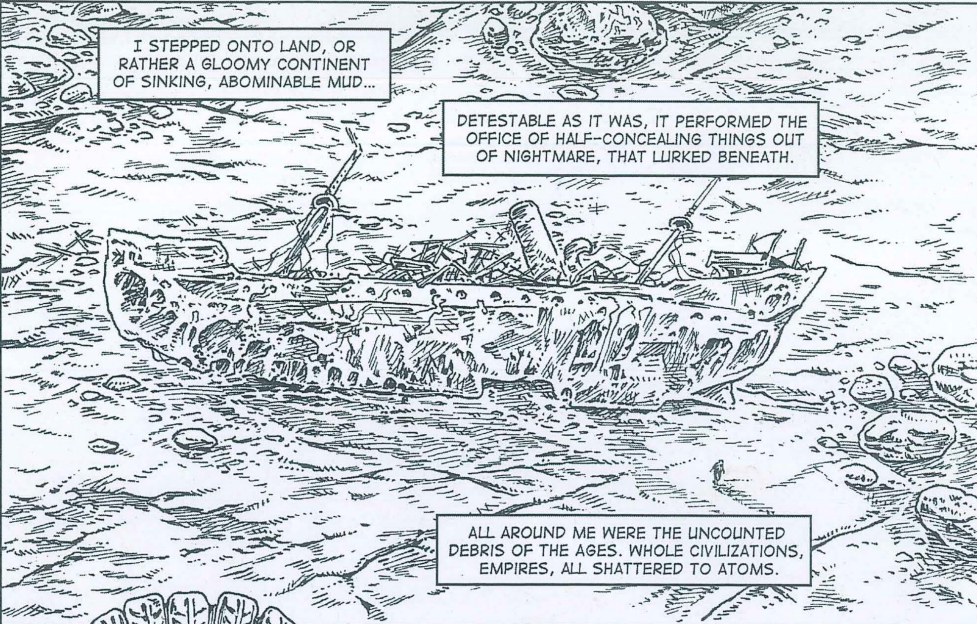
LOVECRAFT IN INDIA

SCRIPT BY JAI LINDURTI
ART BY HARSHO MOHAN CHATTORAJ

I AWOKE IN DARKNESS, WITH
THE COMFORTING THRUM OF
THE ENGINES HAVING CEASED.

AS I CRAWLED THROUGH THE INTESTINES OF
THE CAPSIZED SHIP, I THOUGHT OF THE GREAT
DILLIVIAN MYTHS IN HINDU LORE, WHEN GOD
TOOK THE FORM OF THE MATSYA AVATAR
AND FOUGHT INDESCRIBABLE MONSTERS
IN THE DEPTHS OF THE PRIMORDIAL OCEAN.

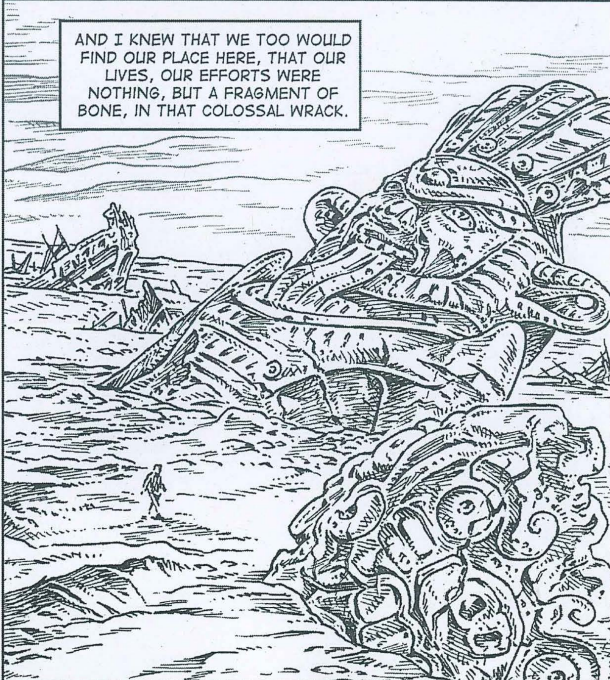




I STEPPED ONTO LAND, OR
RATHER A GLOOMY CONTINENT
OF SINKING, ABOMINABLE MUD...

DETESTABLE AS IT WAS, IT PERFORMED THE
OFFICE OF HALF-CONCEALING THINGS OUT
OF NIGHTMARE, THAT LURKED BENEATH.

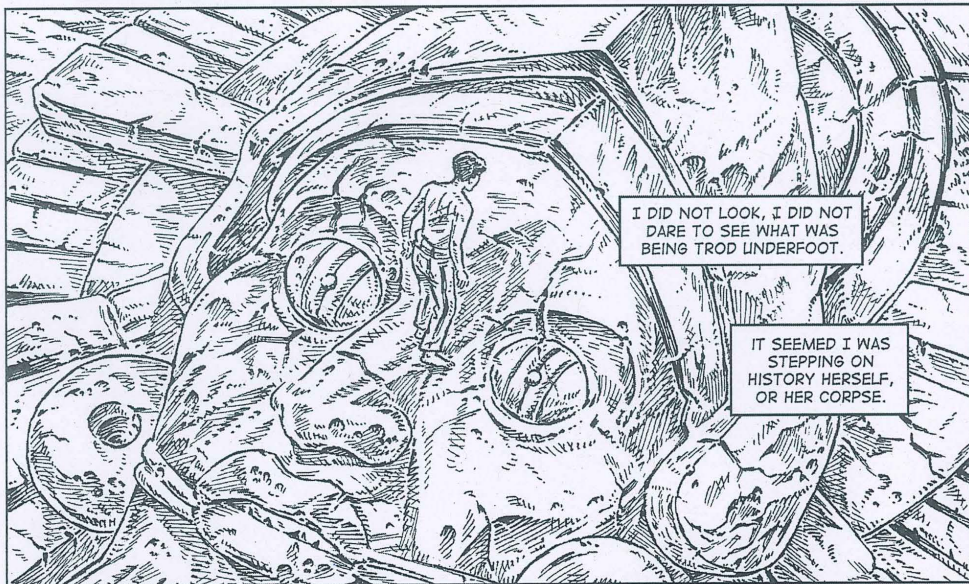
ALL AROUND ME WERE THE UNCOUNTED
DEBRIS OF THE AGES. WHOLE CIVILIZATIONS,
EMPIRES, ALL SHATTERED TO ATOMS.



AND I KNEW THAT WE TOO WOULD
FIND OUR PLACE HERE, THAT OUR
LIVES, OUR EFFORTS WERE
NOTHING, BUT A FRAGMENT OF
BONE, IN THAT COLOSSAL WRACK.

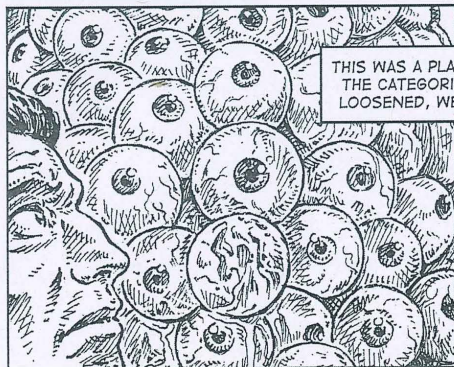


I WAS ASSAILED BY MEPHITIC
ODOURS. MY FEET SEEMED TO
SINK INTO A HELLISH MIRE.

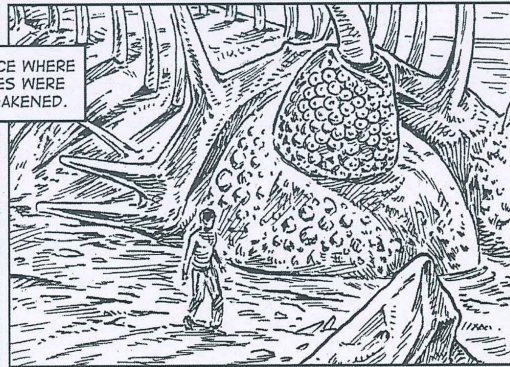


I DID NOT LOOK, I DID NOT
DARE TO SEE WHAT WAS
BEING TROD UNDERFOOT.

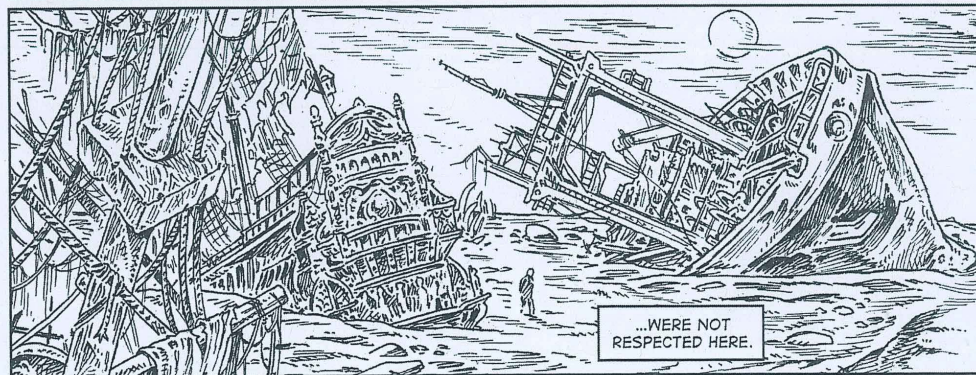
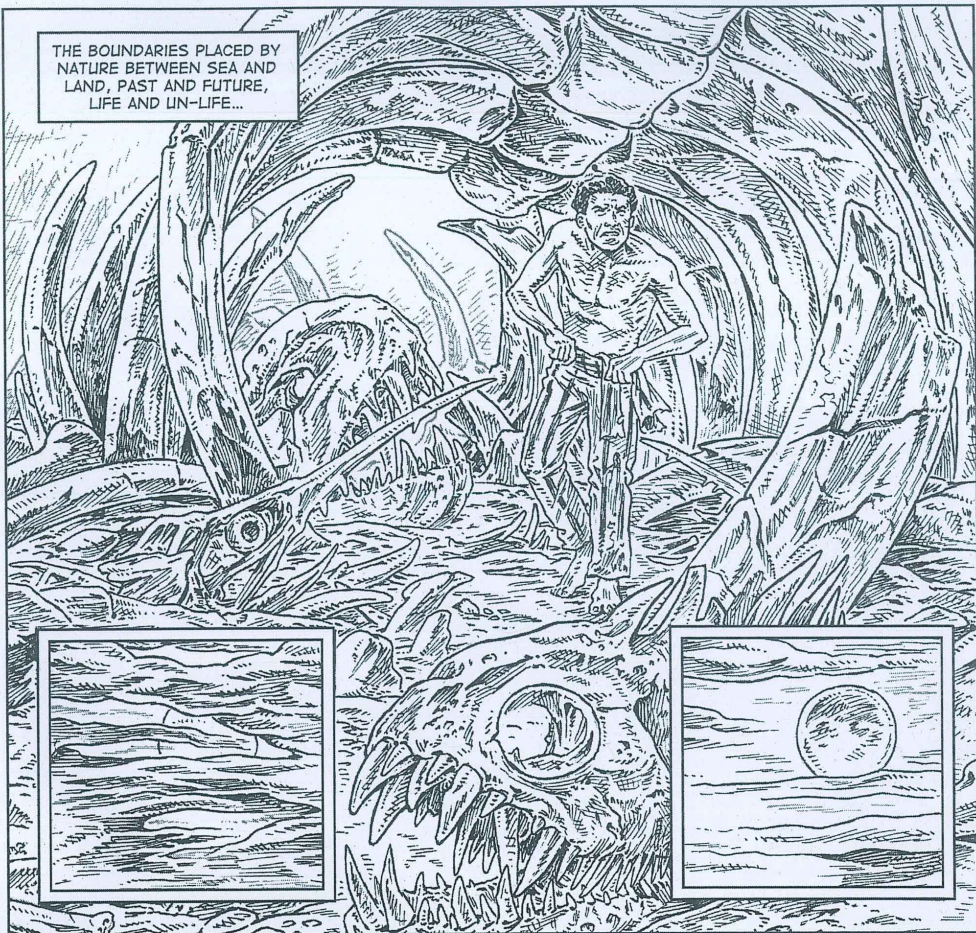
IT SEEMED I WAS
STEPPING ON
HISTORY HERSELF,
OR HER CORPSE.



THIS WAS A PLACE WHERE
THE CATEGORIES WERE
LOOSENEED, WEAKENED.



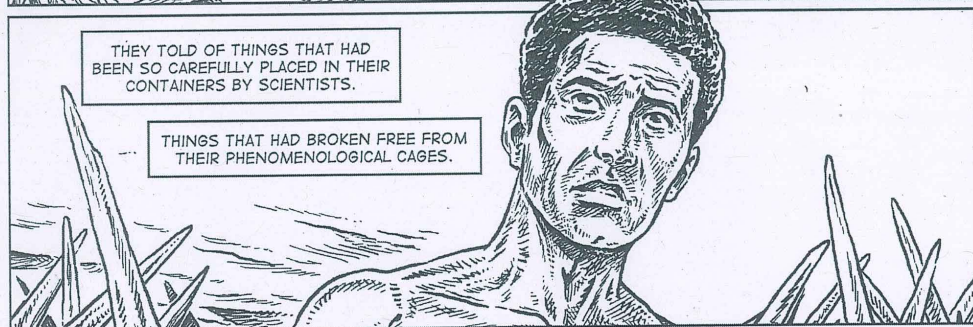
THE BOUNDARIES PLACED BY
NATURE BETWEEN SEA AND
LAND, PAST AND FUTURE,
LIFE AND UN-LIFE...



...WERE NOT
RESPECTED HERE.

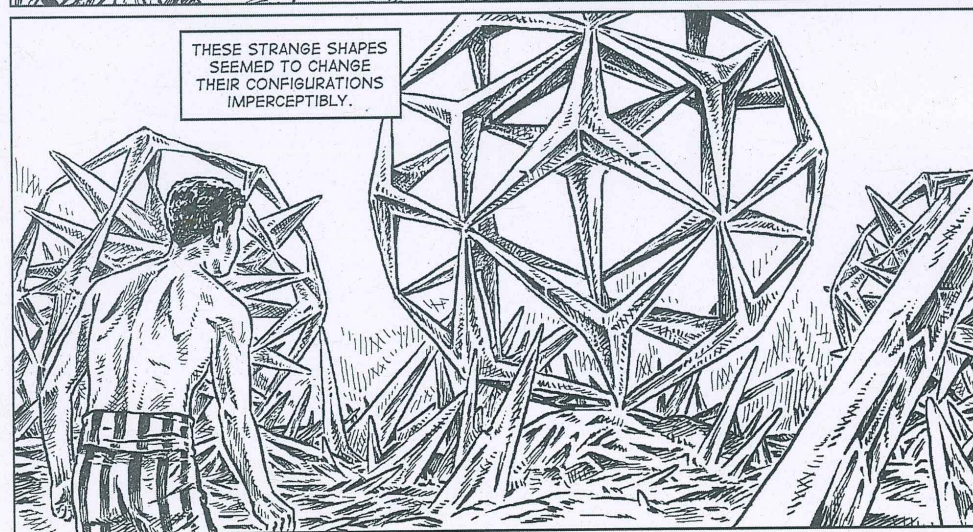


I HEARD A LOW HUMMING...
A WHISPERING INSIDE MY HEAD.

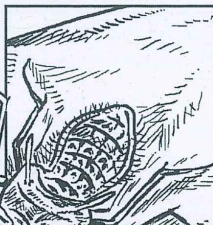
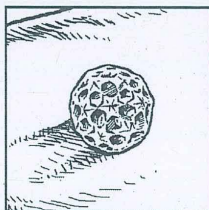
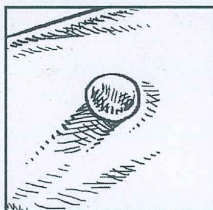


THEY TOLD OF THINGS THAT HAD
BEEN SO CAREFULLY PLACED IN THEIR
CONTAINERS BY SCIENTISTS.

THINGS THAT HAD BROKEN FREE FROM
THEIR PHENOMENOLOGICAL CAGES.



THESE STRANGE SHAPES
SEEMED TO CHANGE
THEIR CONFIGURATIONS
IMPERCEPTIBLY.





The Wind Seas of the Crisis binds as after revelation

by Andrew Whitehouse

South of the River Dee, where it meets the harbour of Aberdeen, the promontory of Girdle Ness extends eastwards into the North Sea. The harbour and estuary have long been hardened and industrialised, particularly since the development of the offshore oil and gas industry that is serviced by ships that are based here.

The peninsula is tipped by a lighthouse, engineered by Robert Stevenson, and a defunct foghorn, known locally as the Torry Coo. It gets its name partly from the loud mooing it once bellowed to passing sailors and partly from the Royal Burgh of Torry, a district of Aberdeen that lies just inland.

This is the place where I've lived for the past sixteen years. As a birder, it has become my local patch: a nearby area I watch regularly.

Girdle Ness is known to birdwatchers as a place to see migrating birds, either coming ashore after an arduous flight from the continent or passing by at sea. The sea is the most inscrutable of habitats around the headland. Terrestrial habitats are more easily explored and their depths, though complex, are perceptible and change rather slowly. The sea presents itself as an opaque medium that is always shifting, sometimes calm, sometimes turbulent.

But these perceptible changes in sea state are only part of what lies beneath. Climate change exerts an influence on the sea that land dwellers are unlikely to notice, particularly as sea temperatures rise to previously unknown levels. But seabirds are acutely sensitive to these shifts at and below the surface, revealing to those watching something of what is happening, of the startling ecological shifts that can take hold rapidly as the Anthropocene emerges.

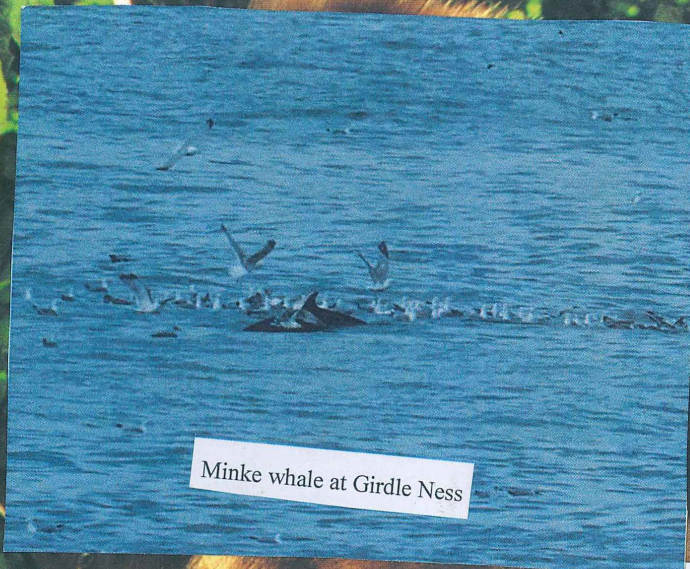
To patch birders like me, the changes in seabird habits and numbers are readily perceptible, far more than they would be to someone visiting a place casually or as a one-off. Seasonal slippages and unsettling shifts and movements are revealed against the lived experience of tentative baselines.

This is a story of the weird autumn of 2023, told through the sea and its avian inhabitants. It's a story of heat and storms, of foam and waves, of starvation and abundance, of strange success and worrying loss.

July and August

The seabird autumn begins when birds finish breeding in mid- to late July. It's normally a time of abundance, with the year's fledglings taking to the water or the skies to feast on abundant shoals of fish.

This year, the seas seemed more fecund than normal; huge heaving flocks of birds gathered in frenzies, often accompanying small groups of Minke Whales. This has been a good year for cetaceans, perhaps partly because they're still rebounding from long-term persecution. For a while, I see whales almost every time I head out to the end of the headland, always a swirl of gulls, auks, and shags in their midst, taking off as one just before a dark arch of back and dorsal fin breaks the surface.



Minke whale at Girdle Ness

At the end of the month, a pod of Pilot Whales gathers: the first time anyone has seen them locally. We worry that they might ground themselves on Aberdeen beach, but after an hour or so of circling in a tight pack, they continue calmly southwards.

Grey Seals are a more familiar presence but now they have taken to hauling out on the rocks below the foghorn, singing across the waves, the sound mixing with the tremulous warbling of young Guillemots and Razorbills, begging to their parents for fresh fish.

There is abundance, more than I've seen for a while, but there are some odd developments too.

By late summer, the harbour becomes a huge roosting and loafing area for Kittiwakes, sometimes local birds from the breeding colonies of the Aberdeenshire coast, and sometimes from further afield. I once found a colour-ringed bird from a colony in Lowestoft, much further to the south. They normally gather in their thousands on the huge concrete harbour breakwaters, but this year they seem not to favour these dense gatherings. Instead, a small group are drawn to an artificial embankment of boulders that lines the southside of the harbour just by the road. This allows for some close views, but I wonder why they have eschewed their normal resting places. Kittiwake and Arctic Tern

The spectre of avian influenza, which afflicted many local seabirds in 2022, lingers over these gatherings. Perhaps the Kittiwakes have been unsettled by losses, by the smell of death, by their own sense that places that once seemed safe no longer give sanctuary. A sickly Arctic Tern appears one evening among the Kittiwakes. It has gone by the next day.

August begins in similar vein, but after I return from a break, a shift has transpired. The feeding frenzies have gone; the seas have quietened. The hordes of Kittiwakes I expect in late summer are nowhere to be found. Instead, they appear in small numbers but in odd places: one juvenile flying inland over the woods as if it doesn't yet realise that the sea is its home.

Amidst the strangeness, there are bursts of abundance: large numbers of Arctic Terns rasp and dive offshore. Flocks pass by in their dozens most evenings, the majority birds of the year. Somewhere, they have escaped the ravages of H5N1 to have a good breeding season.

September

Early September is usually the time of year when seawatching reaches its peak in the North Sea. Most evenings, I head out to the foghorn with my telescope, scanning the sea methodically to catch sight of passing seabirds. It's the best time for more uncommon seabirds, particularly those normally only found in the Atlantic.

In recent years, circling wind patterns have pulled those birds over the top of Britain and into the North Sea from the west to give some excitement to patch birders on the east coast: large numbers of Sooty Shearwaters and the occasional Great Shearwater, both from the south Atlantic; passages of Long-tailed Skuas migrating from Scandinavia; even a Fea's Petrel, a rare visitor from Madeira. This year, the passage of locally rare species is more subdued, but the local birds seem to have gone too.

Aberdeen is famous for its gulls and by late summer, the young birds from harbourside and rooftop colonies should swell the ranks that crowd around harbour breakwaters. Thousands of big, rough looking Herring Gulls dominate the air and the interstitial places where land and sea congeal. But this year, they are somewhere else. Just a few hundred linger around the harbour, the kind of low numbers we normally don't see until winter, when most local birds head north to the fishing harbours of Peterhead and Fraserburgh to feed on trawler scraps.

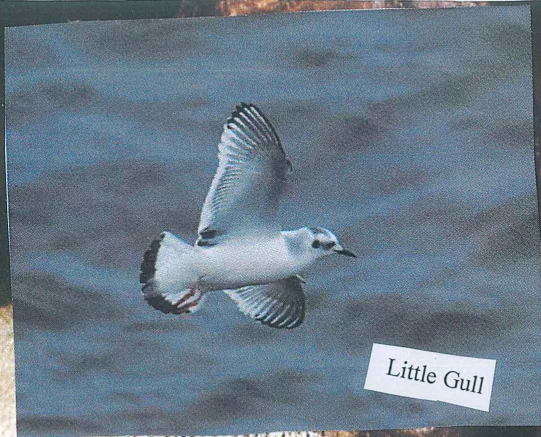
The wintery numbers don't coincide with colder conditions but with an unusual warm spell. For several days, the temperatures top 20 degrees centigrade. This feels like the warmest summer I can remember in Aberdeen, but it's now supposed to be autumn.

It may feel like summertime, but the living isn't easy. There are few fish to jump, and the birds have quickly realised this. Those that can easily leave, like the gulls and Kittiwakes, have probably gone elsewhere.

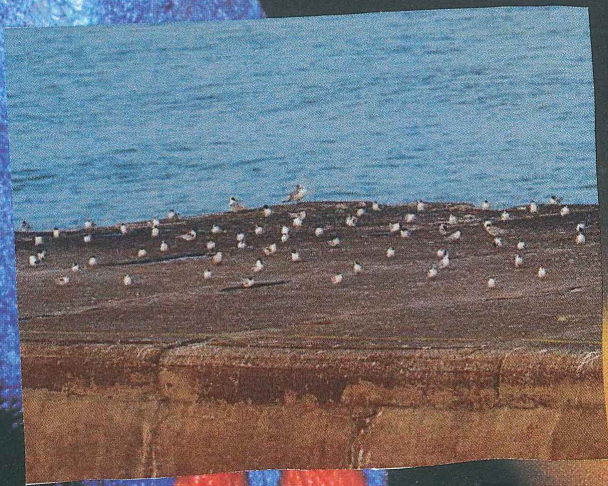
Those that can't leave or travel far, particularly short-winged Guillemots with their attendant young, have a bigger problem. When Guillemots start appearing in the harbour in numbers, I always assume they're in trouble. It doesn't generally happen until later in autumn when storms make feeding harder. This year, there are numerous birds here much earlier and they start moving up the River Dee, where I've never seen them before.

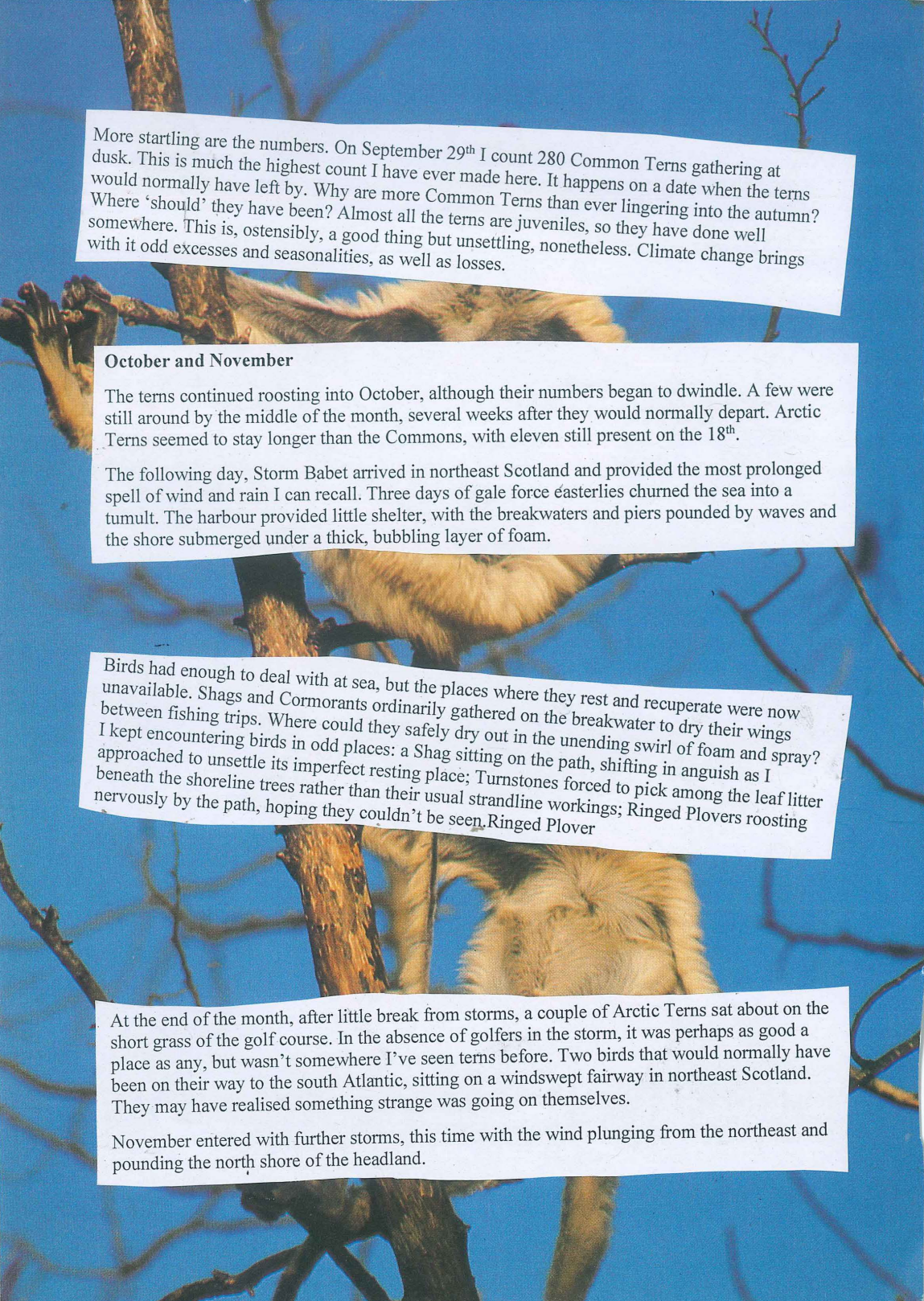
The characteristic early autumn sound of young Guillemots begging parents for food is entirely absent, presumably because the young have all succumbed. But to what? Speculation pivots between Avian Influenza and starvation. Initial tests of dead birds by scientists favour the latter explanation. Could it be that the sea surface temperatures, which are unusually high, have shifted the distribution of small fish that the Guillemots and other seabirds rely on?

Despite the losses and absences, the month ends with some odd excesses. Little Gulls are visitors from northern Europe, and they have become more frequent in recent autumns. This year, there are regular small parties feeding offshore, perhaps pushed north from their regular haunts in the Forth and the Tay.



More startling is the development of a large roost of terns on the harbour breakwater. The breakwater provides a safe space where gulls, Kittiwakes and Cormorants loaf about and preen. Terns tend to use the rocks of nearby Greyhope Bay, but now seem to find the flat but crumbling concrete of the breakwater to their liking. Subtle shifts in infrastructural affordances invisible to humans are noticed by the birds.





More startling are the numbers. On September 29th I count 280 Common Terns gathering at dusk. This is much the highest count I have ever made here. It happens on a date when the terns would normally have left by. Why are more Common Terns than ever lingering into the autumn? Where 'should' they have been? Almost all the terns are juveniles, so they have done well somewhere. This is, ostensibly, a good thing but unsettling, nonetheless. Climate change brings with it odd excesses and seasonalities, as well as losses.

October and November

The terns continued roosting into October, although their numbers began to dwindle. A few were still around by the middle of the month, several weeks after they would normally depart. Arctic Terns seemed to stay longer than the Commons, with eleven still present on the 18th.

The following day, Storm Babet arrived in northeast Scotland and provided the most prolonged spell of wind and rain I can recall. Three days of gale force easterlies churned the sea into a tumult. The harbour provided little shelter, with the breakwaters and piers pounded by waves and the shore submerged under a thick, bubbling layer of foam.

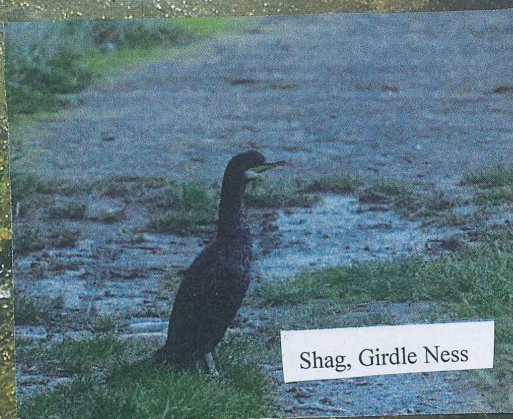
Birds had enough to deal with at sea, but the places where they rest and recuperate were now unavailable. Shags and Cormorants ordinarily gathered on the breakwater to dry their wings between fishing trips. Where could they safely dry out in the unending swirl of foam and spray? I kept encountering birds in odd places: a Shag sitting on the path, shifting in anguish as I approached to unsettle its imperfect resting place; Turnstones forced to pick among the leaf litter beneath the shoreline trees rather than their usual strandline workings; Ringed Plovers roosting nervously by the path, hoping they couldn't be seen. Ringed Plover

At the end of the month, after little break from storms, a couple of Arctic Terns sat about on the short grass of the golf course. In the absence of golfers in the storm, it was perhaps as good a place as any, but wasn't somewhere I've seen terns before. Two birds that would normally have been on their way to the south Atlantic, sitting on a windswept fairway in northeast Scotland. They may have realised something strange was going on themselves.

November entered with further storms, this time with the wind plunging from the northeast and pounding the north shore of the headland.

The harbour filled again with surviving but moribund seabirds: a tatty looking juvenile Little Gull; a weak Shag that allowed close approach. Both were juveniles and had probably known little but storms during their first autumn of life. The seas were emptied of birds once again, perhaps a combination of death and evasive action. An autumnal combination of heat and waves had rendered homely, productive seas hostile to local and passing seabirds.

The harbour itself, a modernist monument to the fossil fuel industry, was showing signs that it would struggle to cope with climate change. The north pier sported a gaping hole that diggers were attempting to bandage with boulders. A sturdy metal fence at the base of the old pier had been ripped away by the waves, just a few years after it had installed following the storm-lashed end of the previous fence.



Shag, Girdle Ness

A large tree trunk carried down the river had wedged itself along the gap. The local waders, which liked to use the secure area cut off by the fence to roost, were now more circumspect. The harbour had been reconfigured by the storms and the birds were still figuring out its new affordances.



Coda

The climate and ecological crises manifest in loss but also in strangeness. The sea, with its uncanny blend of familiarity and inscrutability, is a focal point for unsettling change.

The coast is not simply a window onto loss but is a place of unexpected rearrangements, where storm waves meet rock, concrete and sand, where surface temperatures swelter fish and the birds that feed on them, and where the land is at risk from rising sea levels.

This is a story of loss and disappearance, of strange abundance and fleeting success, of baselines and expectations disrupted, for both humans and birds. The familiarity that comes from solid infrastructure and regular walks and observations seems more tenuous; the shock of autumn slips into winter and carries survivors uneasily forward.

About the author

Andrew Whitehouse is a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Aberdeen and a birder. His research focuses on environmental themes, including landscape, conservation, perceptions of ecological change, and people's relations with birds through sound. He co-edited the book *Landscapes beyond land: Routes, aesthetics and narratives* and is the author of the articles 'Listening to birds in the Anthropocene: The anxious semiotics of sound in a human-dominated world' and 'Loudly sing cuckoo: More-than-human seasonalities in Britain'. A co-edited volume *More-than-human aging: Animals, robots, and care in later life* will be published by Rutgers University Press in 2024. All photos in this essay are by the author and used with permission.

The way many of us

experience the effects of

rapid globalization is

that it has unsettled our

ordinary perceptions of
time, space, ecology,
causality, and agency.

Tim Zocco's comic
explores *weird ecologies*
via unorthodox research
in the underwater kelp
forests off the coast of
South Africa and
beyond. From the
undersea world, the
comic explores the
radical potential of
science fictions,
monsters, alien
ecologies, and
'tentacular' thinking.

WE



ECO

IRD



LOGY

In 'weird ecology', radical ecology meets weird fiction. Weird ecologies are not static geographies, but rather active spaces of encounter, participation and transformation.

Exploring weird ecology can help us to question our assumptions about what is 'natural', how 'nature' should behave, and the relationships or distinctions between humans and other creatures.

Building

The Invasion of the

Waters

Skin

Bodies

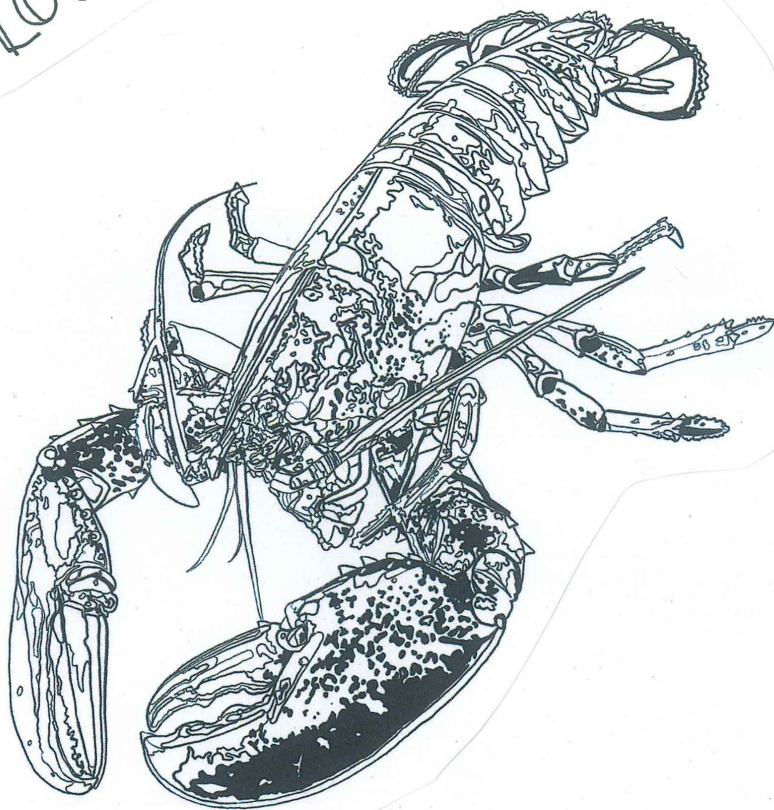
Placentas

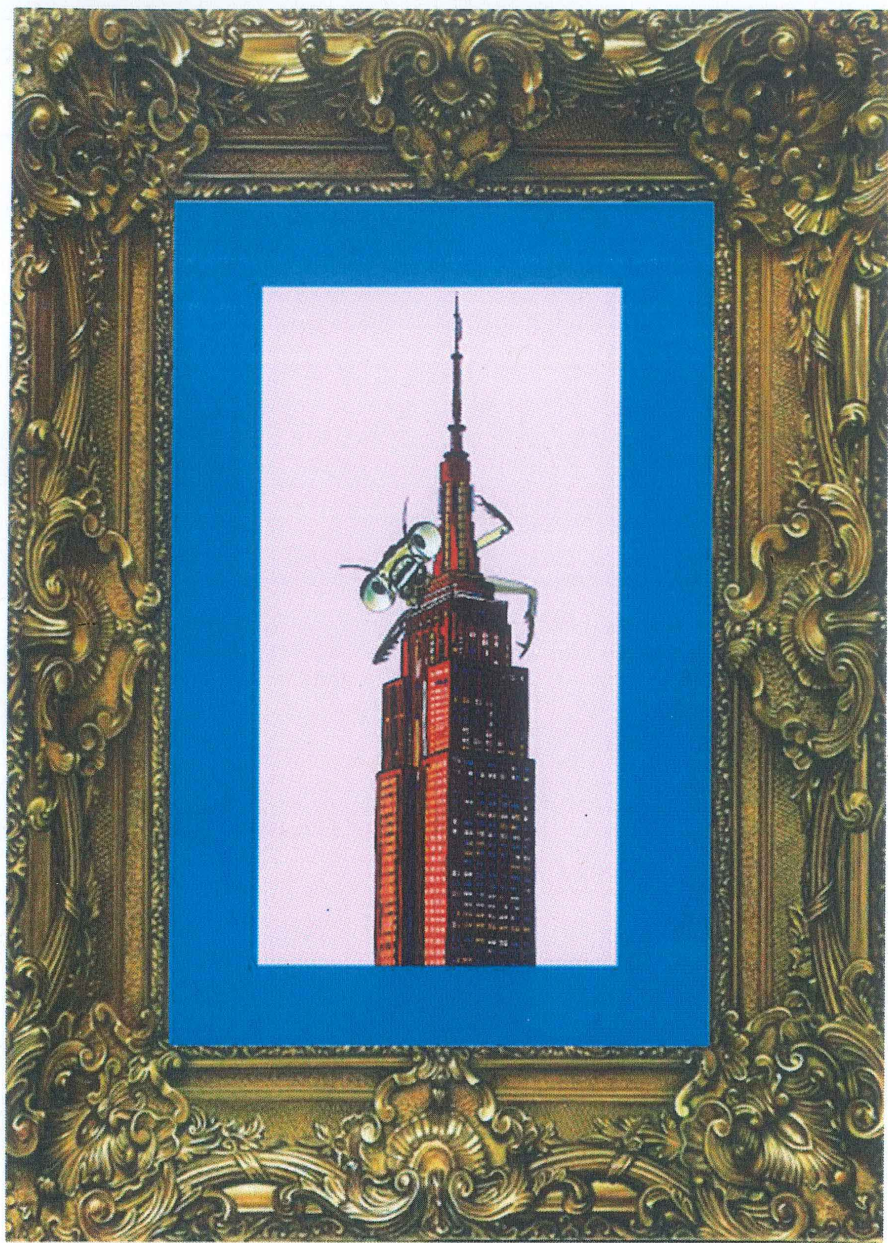


Bacterial growths in a hot spring

SCAN ME!!!

COLOUR ME





CRYPTID



scarification

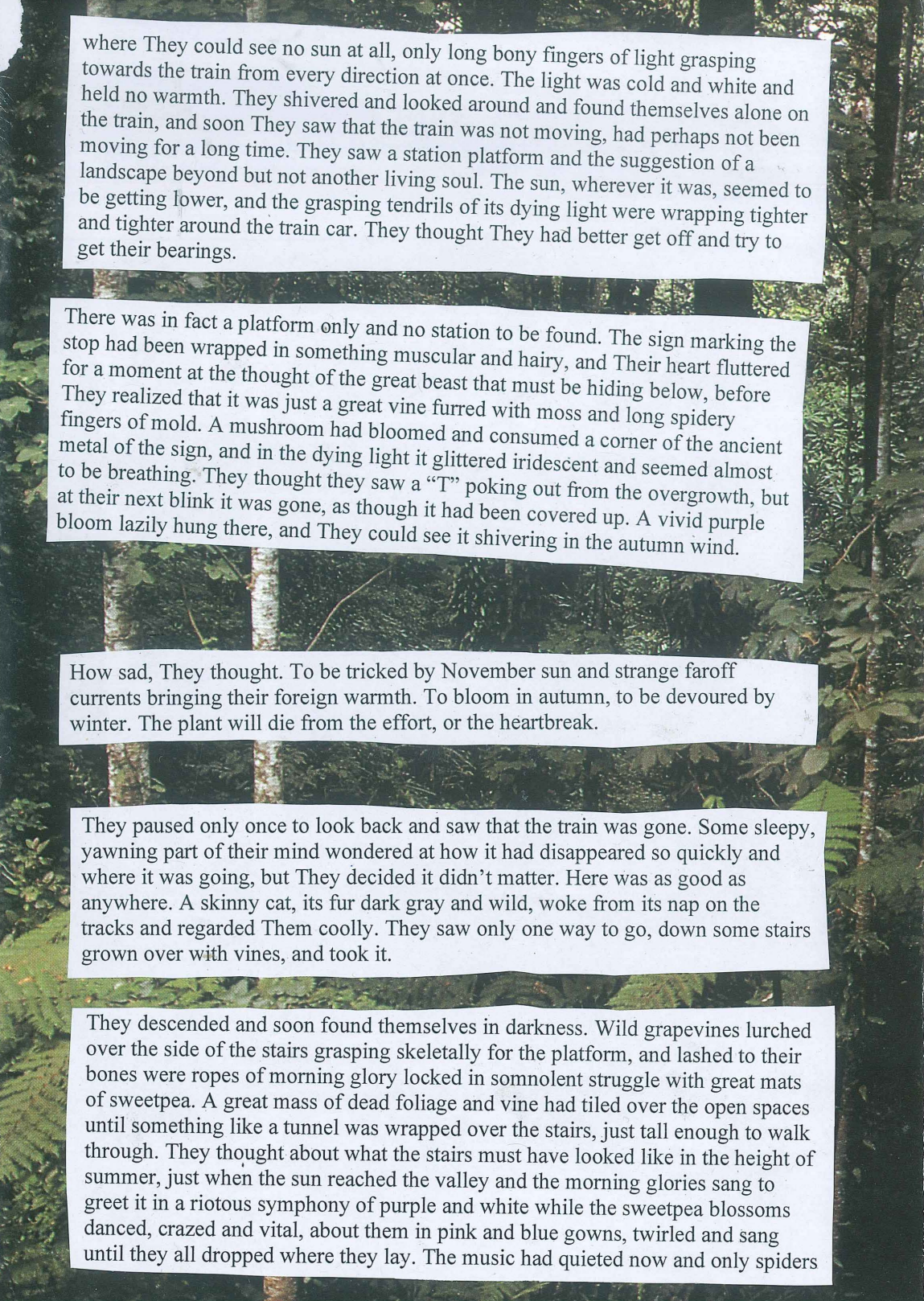
by Michael Reeks

scarification (n.)

1. *making scratches or cuts in;*
2. *lacerating the feelings of;*
3. *cutting up or softening the wall of a hard seed to hasten germination.*

When They woke, the thought of another day at home made their chest seize up like a vine was wrapped tightly around Their heart and within hours They found themselves downtown, through the ticket gates, on the train, racing to nowhere. Indeed the prospect of oblivion had occurred to Them before and this current sojourn was maybe only a slightly more palatable alternative. They had persisted for so long as a blankness, a shadow creeping around the apartment, that They could tolerate no more definite destination than a blank spot on the map.

The train rattled on, north They thought, but They couldn't seem to focus long enough to remember the compass rose and anyway it sometimes seemed like the setting sun was on the left, and then on the right, and soon it entered a valley



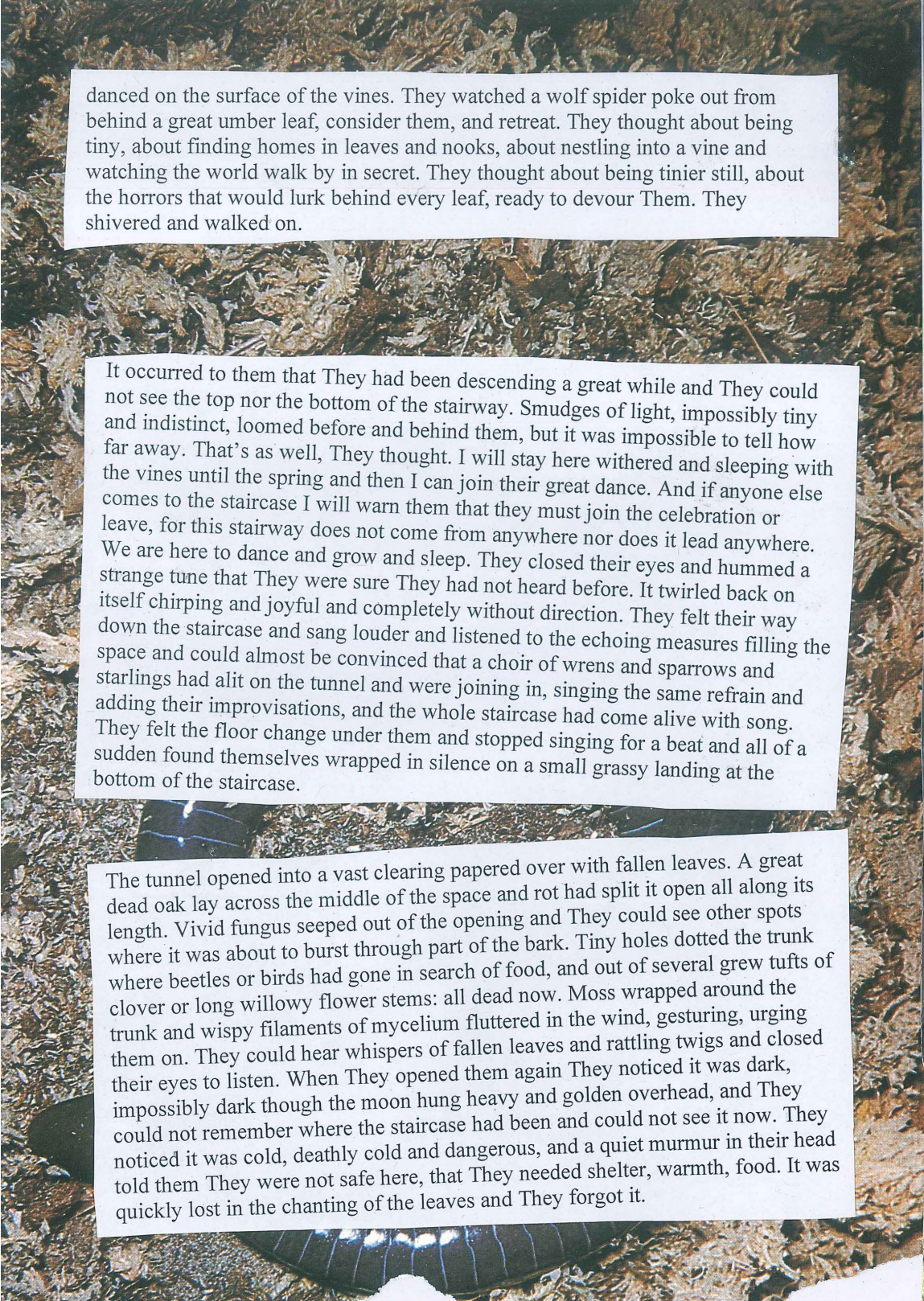
where They could see no sun at all, only long bony fingers of light grasping towards the train from every direction at once. The light was cold and white and held no warmth. They shivered and looked around and found themselves alone on the train, and soon They saw that the train was not moving, had perhaps not been moving for a long time. They saw a station platform and the suggestion of a landscape beyond but not another living soul. The sun, wherever it was, seemed to be getting lower, and the grasping tendrils of its dying light were wrapping tighter and tighter around the train car. They thought They had better get off and try to get their bearings.

There was in fact a platform only and no station to be found. The sign marking the stop had been wrapped in something muscular and hairy, and Their heart fluttered for a moment at the thought of the great beast that must be hiding below, before They realized that it was just a great vine furred with moss and long spidery fingers of mold. A mushroom had bloomed and consumed a corner of the ancient metal of the sign, and in the dying light it glittered iridescent and seemed almost to be breathing. They thought they saw a "T" poking out from the overgrowth, but at their next blink it was gone, as though it had been covered up. A vivid purple bloom lazily hung there, and They could see it shivering in the autumn wind.

How sad, They thought. To be tricked by November sun and strange faroff currents bringing their foreign warmth. To bloom in autumn, to be devoured by winter. The plant will die from the effort, or the heartbreak.

They paused only once to look back and saw that the train was gone. Some sleepy, yawning part of their mind wondered at how it had disappeared so quickly and where it was going, but They decided it didn't matter. Here was as good as anywhere. A skinny cat, its fur dark gray and wild, woke from its nap on the tracks and regarded Them coolly. They saw only one way to go, down some stairs grown over with vines, and took it.

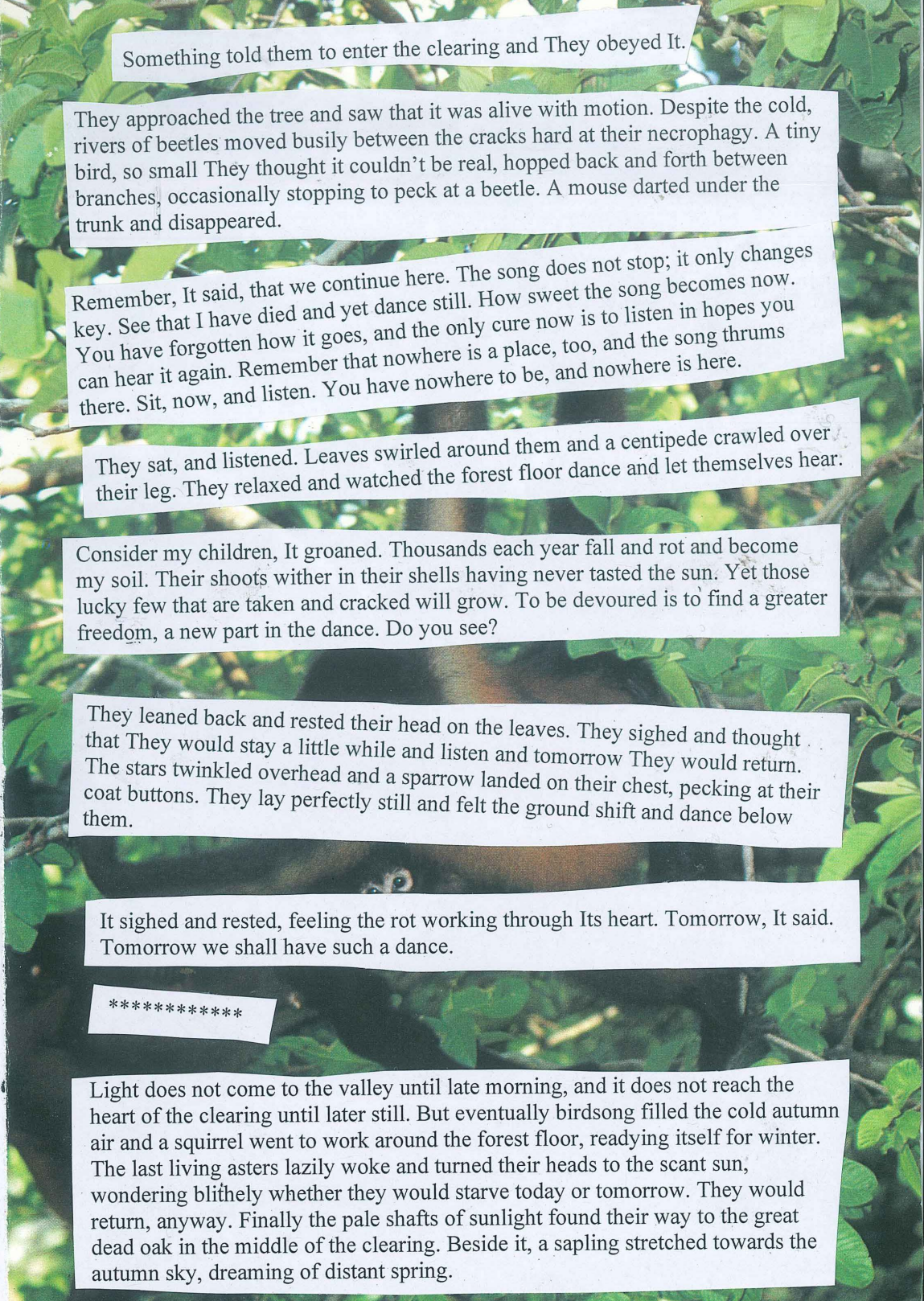
They descended and soon found themselves in darkness. Wild grapevines lurched over the side of the stairs grasping skeletally for the platform, and lashed to their bones were ropes of morning glory locked in somnolent struggle with great mats of sweetpea. A great mass of dead foliage and vine had tiled over the open spaces until something like a tunnel was wrapped over the stairs, just tall enough to walk through. They thought about what the stairs must have looked like in the height of summer, just when the sun reached the valley and the morning glories sang to greet it in a riotous symphony of purple and white while the sweetpea blossoms danced, crazed and vital, about them in pink and blue gowns, twirled and sang until they all dropped where they lay. The music had quieted now and only spiders



danced on the surface of the vines. They watched a wolf spider poke out from behind a great umber leaf, consider them, and retreat. They thought about being tiny, about finding homes in leaves and nooks, about nestling into a vine and watching the world walk by in secret. They thought about being tinier still, about the horrors that would lurk behind every leaf, ready to devour Them. They shivered and walked on.

It occurred to them that They had been descending a great while and They could not see the top nor the bottom of the stairway. Smudges of light, impossibly tiny and indistinct, loomed before and behind them, but it was impossible to tell how far away. That's as well, They thought. I will stay here withered and sleeping with the vines until the spring and then I can join their great dance. And if anyone else comes to the staircase I will warn them that they must join the celebration or leave, for this stairway does not come from anywhere nor does it lead anywhere. We are here to dance and grow and sleep. They closed their eyes and hummed a strange tune that They were sure They had not heard before. It twirled back on itself chirping and joyful and completely without direction. They felt their way down the staircase and sang louder and listened to the echoing measures filling the space and could almost be convinced that a choir of wrens and sparrows and starlings had alit on the tunnel and were joining in, singing the same refrain and adding their improvisations, and the whole staircase had come alive with song. They felt the floor change under them and stopped singing for a beat and all of a sudden found themselves wrapped in silence on a small grassy landing at the bottom of the staircase.

The tunnel opened into a vast clearing papered over with fallen leaves. A great dead oak lay across the middle of the space and rot had split it open all along its length. Vivid fungus seeped out of the opening and They could see other spots where it was about to burst through part of the bark. Tiny holes dotted the trunk where beetles or birds had gone in search of food, and out of several grew tufts of clover or long willowy flower stems: all dead now. Moss wrapped around the trunk and wispy filaments of mycelium fluttered in the wind, gesturing, urging them on. They could hear whispers of fallen leaves and rattling twigs and closed their eyes to listen. When They opened them again They noticed it was dark, impossibly dark though the moon hung heavy and golden overhead, and They could not remember where the staircase had been and could not see it now. They noticed it was cold, deathly cold and dangerous, and a quiet murmur in their head told them They were not safe here, that They needed shelter, warmth, food. It was quickly lost in the chanting of the leaves and They forgot it.



Something told them to enter the clearing and They obeyed It.

They approached the tree and saw that it was alive with motion. Despite the cold, rivers of beetles moved busily between the cracks hard at their necrophagy. A tiny bird, so small They thought it couldn't be real, hopped back and forth between branches, occasionally stopping to peck at a beetle. A mouse darted under the trunk and disappeared.

Remember, It said, that we continue here. The song does not stop; it only changes key. See that I have died and yet dance still. How sweet the song becomes now. You have forgotten how it goes, and the only cure now is to listen in hopes you can hear it again. Remember that nowhere is a place, too, and the song thrums there. Sit, now, and listen. You have nowhere to be, and nowhere is here.

They sat, and listened. Leaves swirled around them and a centipede crawled over their leg. They relaxed and watched the forest floor dance and let themselves hear.

Consider my children, It groaned. Thousands each year fall and rot and become my soil. Their shoots wither in their shells having never tasted the sun. Yet those lucky few that are taken and cracked will grow. To be devoured is to find a greater freedom, a new part in the dance. Do you see?

They leaned back and rested their head on the leaves. They sighed and thought that They would stay a little while and listen and tomorrow They would return. The stars twinkled overhead and a sparrow landed on their chest, pecking at their coat buttons. They lay perfectly still and felt the ground shift and dance below them.

It sighed and rested, feeling the rot working through Its heart. Tomorrow, It said. Tomorrow we shall have such a dance.

Light does not come to the valley until late morning, and it does not reach the heart of the clearing until later still. But eventually birdsong filled the cold autumn air and a squirrel went to work around the forest floor, readying itself for winter. The last living asters lazily woke and turned their heads to the scant sun, wondering blithely whether they would starve today or tomorrow. They would return, anyway. Finally the pale shafts of sunlight found their way to the great dead oak in the middle of the clearing. Beside it, a sapling stretched towards the autumn sky, dreaming of distant spring.

Clouties



Clouties is a ghost story filmed at Grovely Wood, in southern Wiltshire, England.

"It's the same impossibly straight road, haunted, so it's said, by marching soldiers; and there's the ditch, curving and wriggling round the edge of it, like the worm which once, so it's said, ate the village of Steeple Langford..."

"I spent nine months visiting Grovely Wood, a 2,000 acre registered common and former Norman hunting forest near to Salisbury, Wiltshire. Grovely has a distinctive, slightly eerie atmosphere, is rich in ancient trees and folklore, is traversed by a Roman road and has a complex, fascinating history.

Clouties - a Scots word for offerings hung on trees - brings together folklore and history and explores Grovely affectively. It's also my first foray into fiction, and has a light folk horror touch." - Andy Thatcher

To watch the film and find out more, visit andyjthatcher.com



volatile ecologies and shifting islands

by Sampurna Das

In this excerpt from a longer photo essay published on the Future Natures website, Sampurna Das explores the notion of 'volatility' in the river islands of Assam, eastern India. Sampurna draws from Krause and Eriksen's (2023) conceptualisation of volatility, who see it as a way of life between 'flexibility' and 'crisis'.

The photo essay explores what life in a shifting ecology means and does to its inhabitants. Engaging with volatility as a framework is to acknowledge the hardships and challenges of living in moving river islands and the hopes and opportunities available in these volatile ecologies.

Some islands are less solid and reliable than you might imagine. In the rivers of Assam, the islands move. The local name for them is *chars*: they are shifting landscapes that continuously appear and disappear, accrete and erode.

Volatility is a daily reality for the *char* or river island people of Assam. Their lives challenge the boundaries between nature/culture and land/water that are built on ideas of predictability and control.

Amid the shifting, changing river landscape, various different embankments have been used by administrators – from British colonial times to the present day – on the basis that *char* ecology is chaotic and needs to be controlled.

But the people of the *chars* don't see it that way. Instead, their lives suggest *volatility* as an alternative way to see the local ecology and the relations between nature/culture and land/water.

As islands have moved and changed over the centuries, so people have developed traditions and strategies to live with the shifting landscape and waterscape of the river. But new construction projects and technologies have brought new uncertainties.



Noor calls his friend to help him relocate to a different part of the river island after the annual flood has eroded his backyard. This is the eighth time Noor will move his household since he was married fifteen years ago. A stack of maize is also visible in the backdrop, damaged due to prolonged inundation. Maize is one of the cash crops of the river island region in Assam.

Noor says that, in recent years, with the building of dams upstream, the Brahmaputra River has become much more volatile, making it difficult to predict the flood cycles. The construction of dams in the Brahmaputra river can be traced back to British colonial engineering efforts.



Surma was making portable mud stoves on a sunny winter morning in January. Women in the river islands make these mud wares during the dry winter months, in preparation for the monsoons and flood season. During the floods, when their kitchens are inundated, women use these portable mud stoves for cooking on boats.

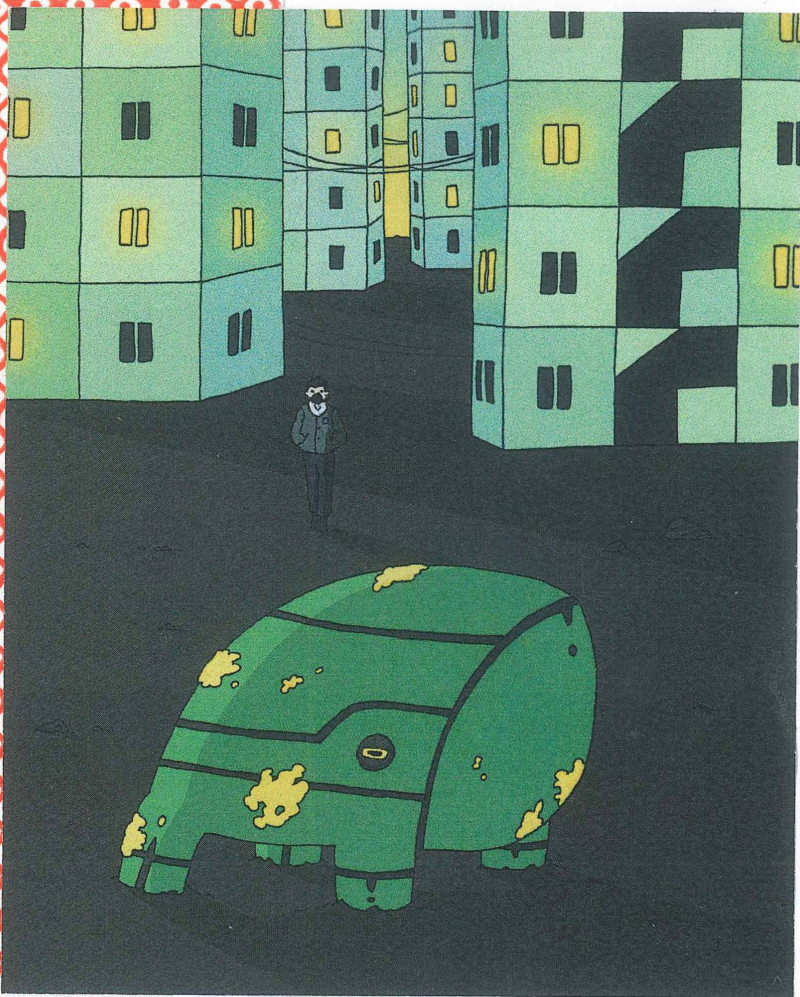


The people of the river islands have differing views on the effectiveness of bamboo poles, installed by the state as a way to manage erosion. For most people, these poles restrict their smooth passage to the boats, which are the only means of transport connecting these river islands to the inland areas. They believe that corrupt local middlemen, patrons and low-level bureaucrats have most to gain from these river management schemes.

They challenge the view of nature as something that needs to be controlled to make it liveable and productive; as something separate from society.

The *char* community question the discourse that presents chars as places that are hazardous, isolated, chaotic, and overall not fit for humans.

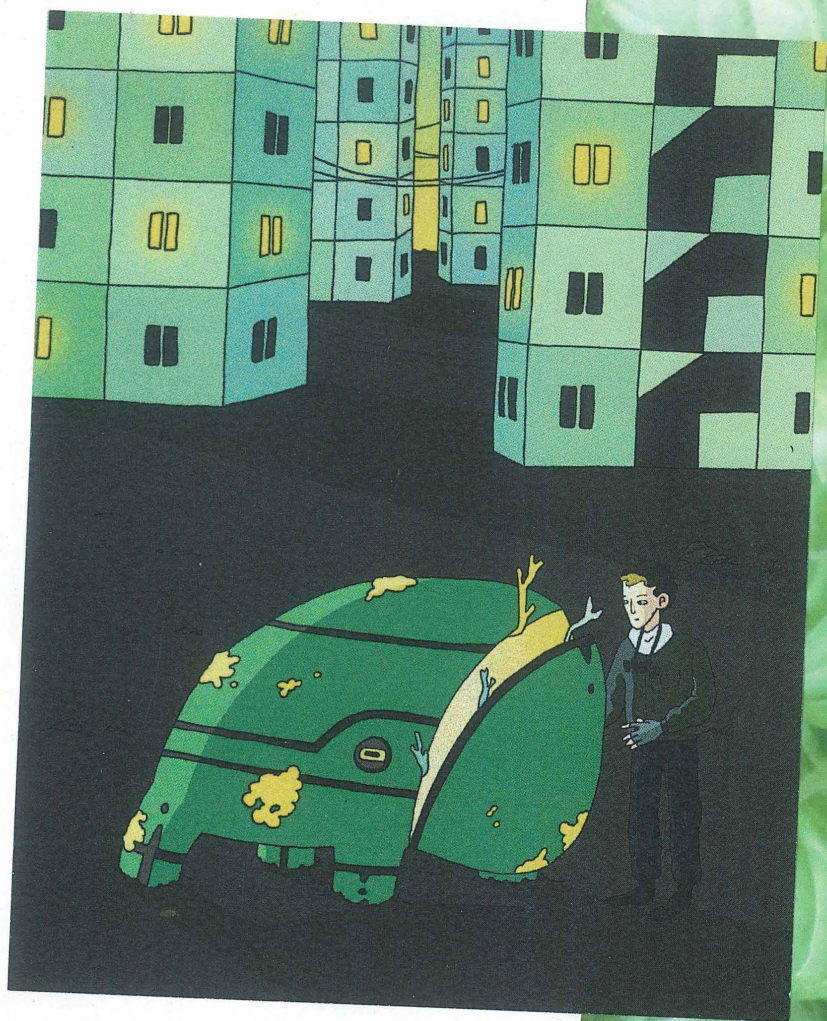
They argue instead that nature does not need to be 'harnessed', or to be of a certain kind, for it to sustain viable social life.

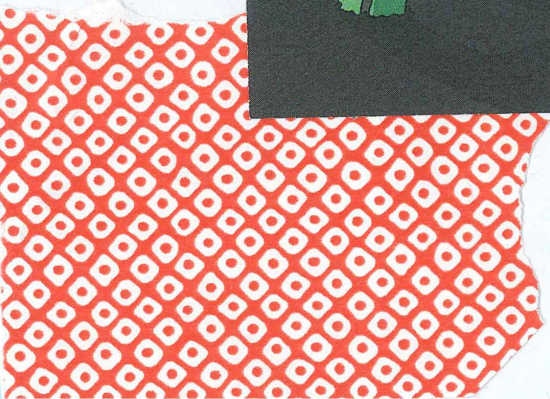
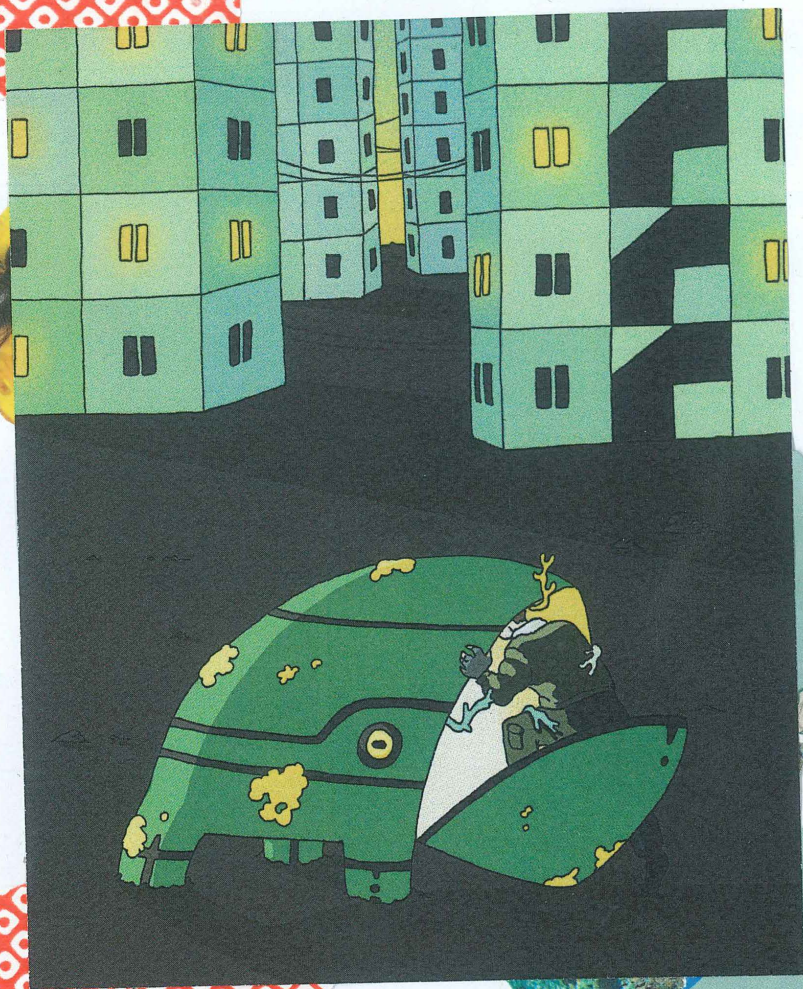
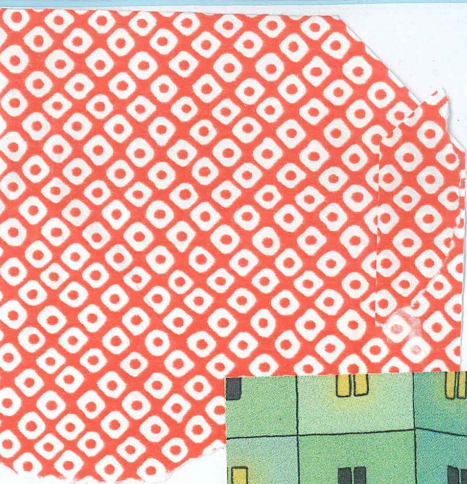


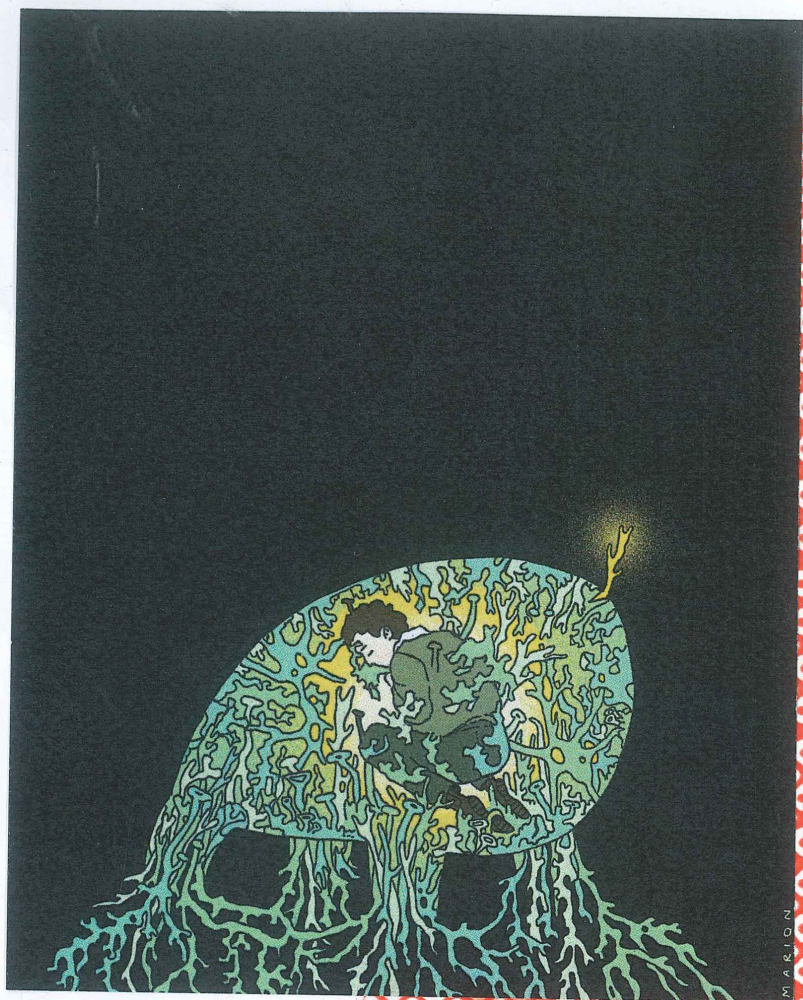
Marion's Instagram: [@marmarsaurus](https://www.instagram.com/marmarsaurus)

by Marion Bessol









原 真 子

昭和十三年四月生、東京府立
女子大学文学部卒業、文芸
春秋社に入社、文芸春秋、

making



MARION

NATURAL HISTORY



BODIES

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

BUILDING



the value of a voice

Sara Stoudt

We never learn, do we?

Some of us were strivers, not content to stay home. We had to do better; we had to ascend. Others of us were explorers, thrill-seekers looking to get out of the deep-sea bubble. Some even wanted to find a human connection with love-sick eyes pointing upwards.

Whatever our reasons were – we had them, justified by *up there*. We have other skills, we told ourselves – what's the value of one measly voice in the grand scheme of things, anyway? Take them, Ursula, put them in your shell. We want more, up where they walk, up where they run.

We made the wrong choice, but it took a while to notice. We were having our fun up above. The ambitious ones saw our work speak for itself. We, the explorers, experienced plenty and hoarded those experiences; there was no need to share them with others. The lovers among us were having plenty of success flirting with just our eyes, body language indeed. There was no need to think about what we relinquished to the shell, what it might be doing in our stead.

Meanwhile, under that sea, Ursula was amassing power and influence. Alone we didn't feel like we had them, but the collection of our voices was mighty. Ursula was 'fixing' all kinds of 'problems'. Wouldn't it be great if we could skip the blank page and have the shell produce a first draft of well, anything? What about the tedious process of deep-diving on that super-specific request from a boss? Outsource it to the shell! But we on land couldn't get over the feeling that the great thing about writer's block was that it was ours.

Our harnessed voices were meanwhile being used – nay, 'utilized' – to over-optimize the ocean, all while bleeding it dry of feeling, sparks of inspiration, fleeting daydreams that ended up changing our lives when pursued. All that was left was an over-smoothed hydra of given-up voices. Cut off one head, two more grow back – less original and more autoregressive than before. Things we didn't need crowded out the things we did, and all we could do was look down from above. Shell applications abounded:

- a grocery list à la Hemingway (Olives are enough to make it a grocery list, right?)
- a piece of code to automate away a people problem (Learn to code? Why bother?)
- a tear-jerker college admittance essay (Trust your whole future to a snail's former home, that seems reasonable.)

Every thought, every idea, every answer came from the shell now. We just had to ask. But none of us up here ever did. Uninspired down below, disenfranchised up above. Disemvoweled.

Disenconsonanted too while we were at it.

We couldn't even go home. We would have no way to help out the sea's society, no purpose. Our functions were being replaced by an eerie eigen-voice – a composite of our best and worst qualities. Ursula had it all, rolling in the deep. Yes, that Adele reference might have given an inkling of our contingent of dad-joke sensibilities, but don't be fooled. That came from Ursula's shell, trained on what we so brazenly gave up, compounded by the misjudgments of others.

The irony that Ursula's shell was constantly learning while we failed to – as we kept doing the same thing over and over again, giving up our voices to climb higher and higher – was not lost on us. But what choice did we have? What do you want from us? To literally break out of the shell? Easier said than done.

We had a friend that tried – an intrepid artist type who was secure in what she knew was a real 'point of view'. We didn't really know what that meant any more, but we were rooting for her all the same.

It wasn't easy. She had to double down on who she was and never relinquish that special, magical, precious thing that made her well, weird. As part of this process she became prolific. No thought was too silly to record and share, and she just did not have time for critiques of navel-gazing, that was the whole point. We, up where they stay all day in the sun, were always hoping that one of her missives would wash ashore so that we could live through her.

Ursula and her shell tried and tried to reproduce the artist's style, the shell being continually commanded to 'write a poem in the key of art'. But it couldn't be done. Ursula went on the offensive, trying to tempt the artist into giving up her voice. Isn't there something you want? Something only I can give you? But the artist stood steadfast. She had what she needed; she was who she was.

Now you might think that it was just the scarcity of the artist's voice that was valuable, the want- what-you-can't-have of it all, but it was more than that. It was a voice unbuyable, untradeable, uncontainable.

She became our beacon of hope, shining bright even from the depths of the sea, and although our old voices were trapped in that damned shell, we started to wonder if we could develop new ones. If she found a way to value her voice, maybe we could start again and do the same.

There may be hope for us yet.

About the author

Sara Stoudt is a statistician, teacher, and writer from Pennsylvania. She is the co-author of Communicating with Data: The Art of Writing for Data Science and a member of the editorial team for the Future of Data Science and Our Environment creative data anthologies. Her other non-academic writing can be found in The Pudding and on the Cover Me blog among others.

BRICKS

By Ceri Bythesea



The short film 'BRICKS' started out as an exploration of how people delineate between natural spaces, and those spaces found in the parts of the world we have shaped to suit our needs.

The natural world is revered, but that respect only goes so far. The majority of our energies are spent on either changing it or subjugating it, introducing a strangeness to both environments.

In pulling the film together, it became apparent that it was much more focused on the human-centred world and the sad, strange isolation we have created for ourselves.



Excerpt of a story by Callum Aitken

...“Tell the story,” she said, “What did you see in the pale glade beyond the two grandmother oaks?” The bard can see the twigs in her hair and the dark mud caking her feet. “I can’t tell you,” he stammers in response.

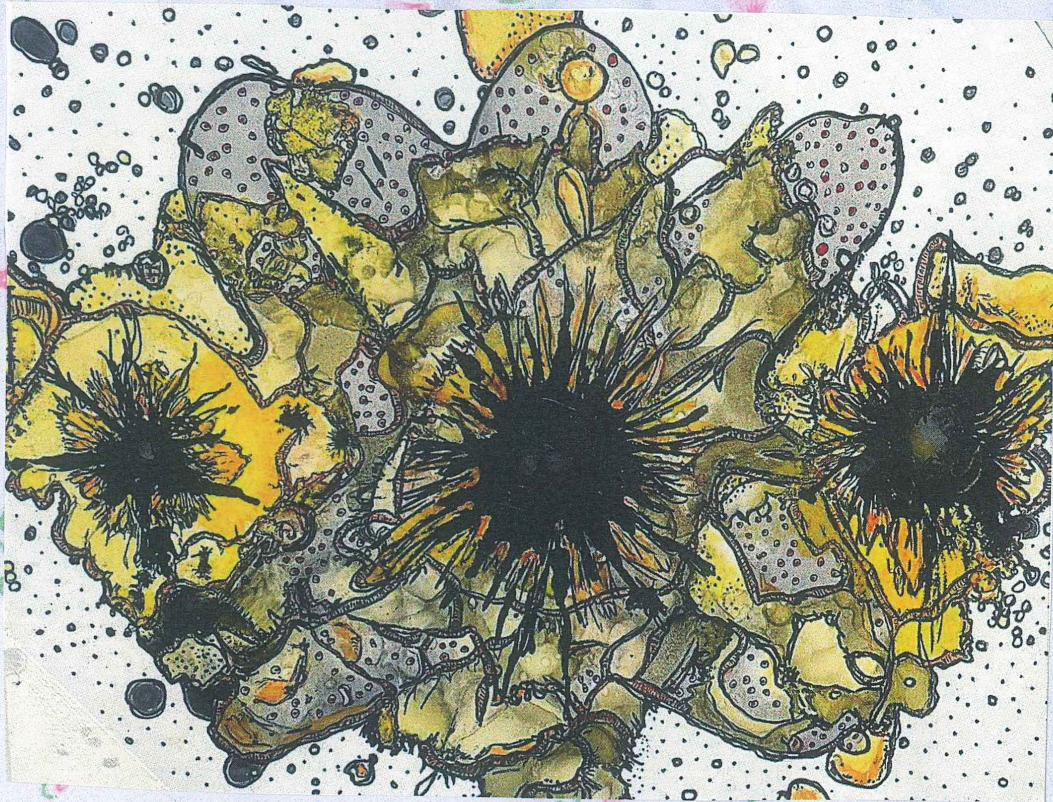
The girl walked right up to him, still looking into his eyes. The bard can smell the humus and feel the lichen beneath his clothes. She says again, “Tell us the story. Tell us what you saw in the pale glade, beyond the two grandmother oaks.”

The bard finally sighs and, fearful, begins to recount the tale. He feels the whiskers of his beard tighten, drawn out in tangible growth. He chokes on ivy and root. The fear grows as he tries desperately to prevent the ancient movement of his tongue, now rough with spines. Moss and mycelium mat the fur streaking his back. His hands snap back, his fingers contract; the keratin of his nails is squeezed together, becoming hard and sharp as claws...

Photo:

hands by Bridget McKenzie (cc by-nc 2.0)

artwork by
heather sanchez



Heather Sanchez makes speculative eco-art in Asheville, North Carolina.

Instagram: @heatherksanchezart



podcasts

FORGOTTEN PLACES AND THE FIELD OF MEMORY

Landscapes are haunted by the legacies of infrastructure projects and the 'forgotten places' that are sacrificed to them.

Cansu Sönmez talks about her research on people's responses to large infrastructure developments like dams and railways, that disrupt their lives and the spaces where they live.



Cansu shares the story of what happened in the old town of Hasankeyf in Turkey, which was recently flooded by a large dam built to provide hydroelectric power. She also describes the ongoing resistance in Italy against the TAV high speed railway, and how people link memories with places in ways that challenge the visions of developers and the state. We discuss the idea of 'organised abandonment' and what it means for people and places who are left behind.

FOLK HORROR AND ENGLISH COMMONS

Andy Thatcher talks about histories and folk legends linked to historic commons in the southwest of England, and how he uses research and film making to explore their atmospheres and stories.

Folk traditions have long been ways for local people to assert claims to the land. Though many historic English commons are obscure and little-known, they can reveal histories of conflict and trauma.

The conversation touches on ideas about how the 'weird', the 'eerie' and haunting can help us think differently about places. We also discuss how folk horror of the 1970s and beyond – from the *Wicker Man* and *Penda's Fen* to *Candyman* and examples from other countries and cultures – can open up deep histories, clashes between tradition and modernity and moral ambiguity.

Listen:
futurenatures.substack.com/s/future-natures-podcast

"Sarah had never seen ghosts, not once in her life. She

hadn't believed in them, and she hadn't disbelieved in them.



Most interesting was to realize she wasn't afraid of them."

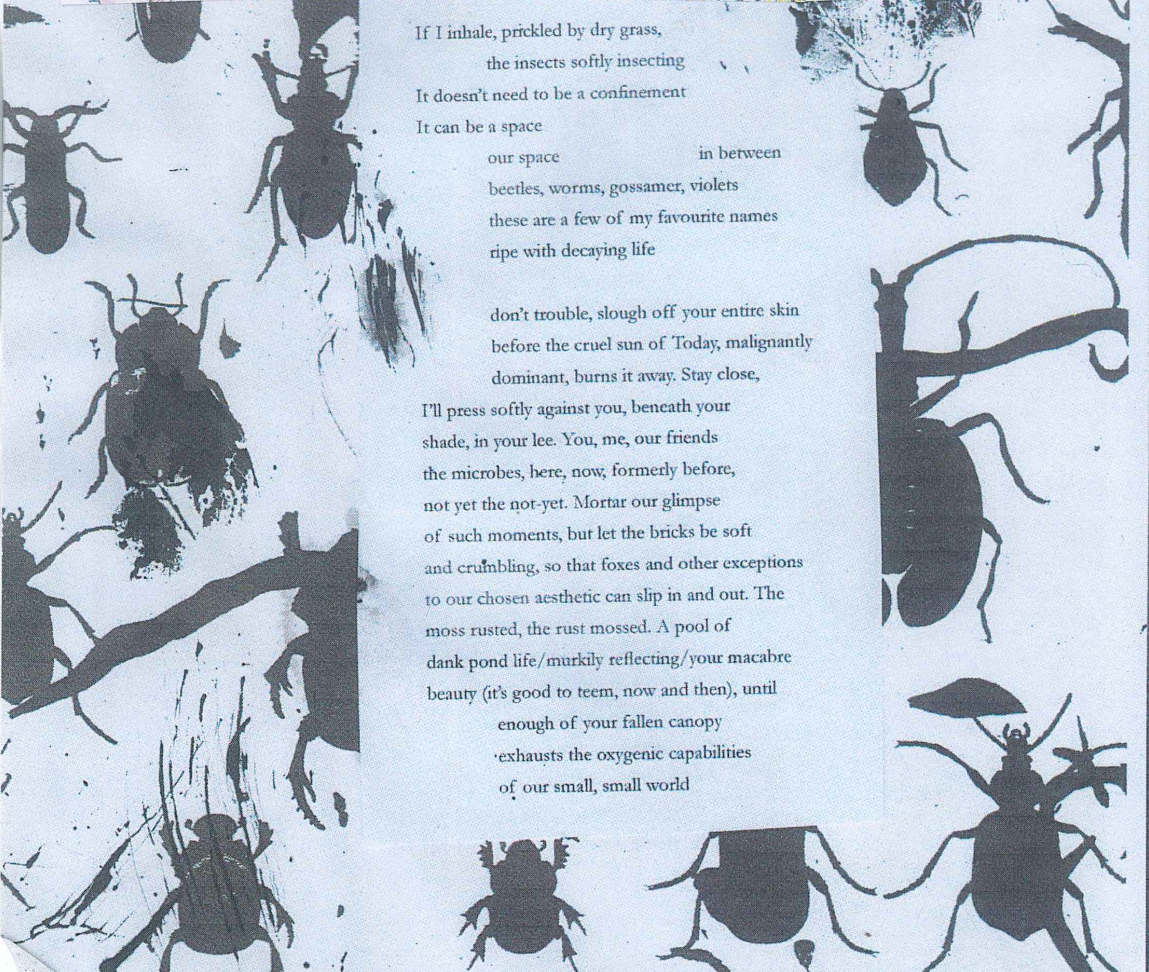
Margaret Killjoy, *It Bleeds It Burrows It Breaks the Bone*



Strange Realism



excerpt from a zine
by Francis Gene-Rowe

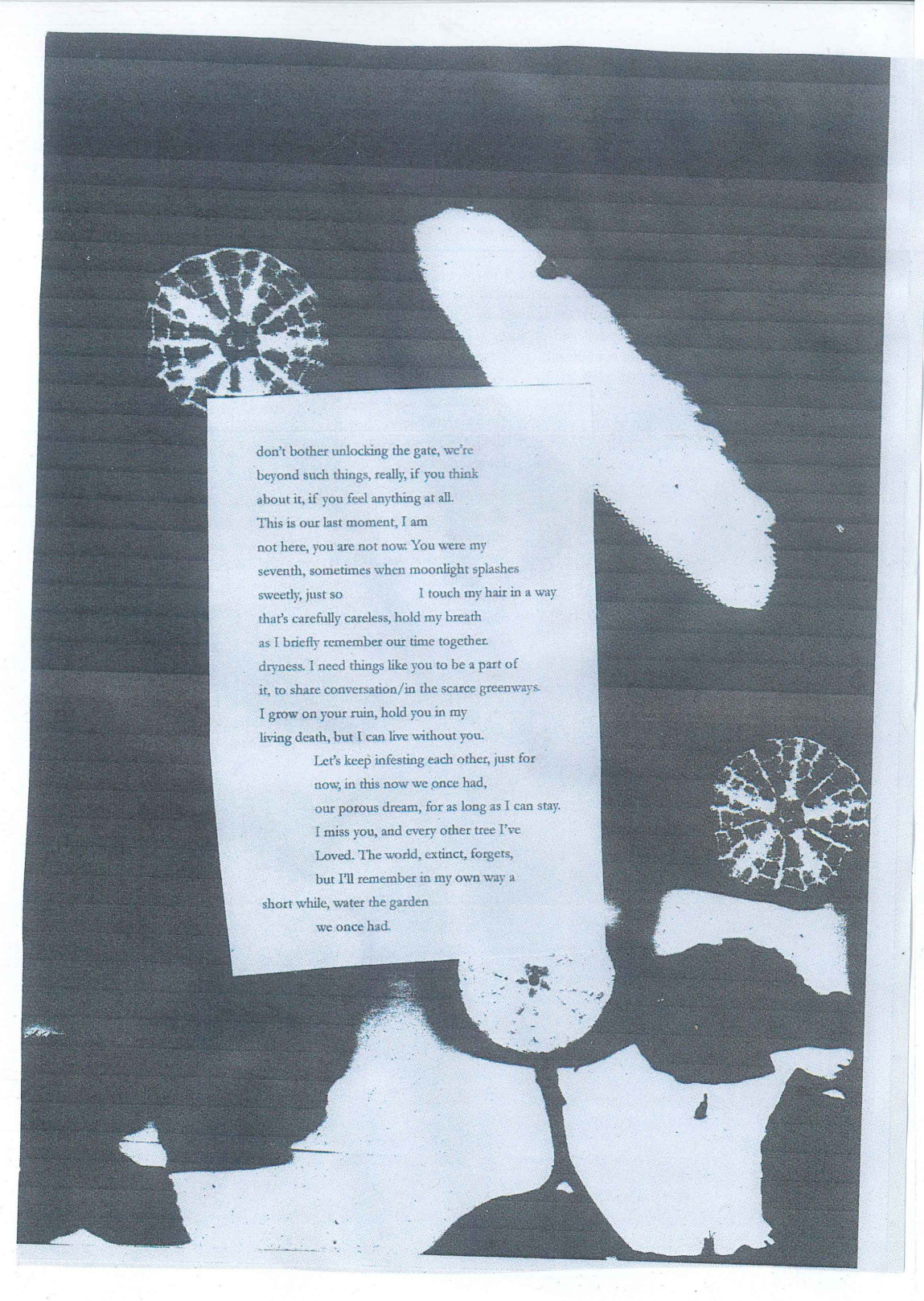


If I inhale, pricked by dry grass,
the insects softly insecting
It doesn't need to be a confinement
It can be a space
our space in between
beetles, worms, gossamer, violets
these are a few of my favourite names
ripe with decaying life

don't trouble, slough off your entire skin
before the cruel sun of Today, malignantly
dominant, burns it away. Stay close,

I'll press softly against you, beneath your
shade, in your lee. You, me, our friends
the microbes, here, now, formerly before,
not yet the not-yet. Mortar our glimpse
of such moments, but let the bricks be soft
and crumbling, so that foxes and other exceptions
to our chosen aesthetic can slip in and out. The
moss rusted, the rust mossed. A pool of
dark pond life/murkily reflecting/your macabre
beauty (it's good to teem, now and then), until

enough of your fallen canopy
exhausts the oxygenic capabilities
of our small, small world



don't bother unlocking the gate, we're
beyond such things, really, if you think
about it, if you feel anything at all.
This is our last moment, I am
not here, you are not now: You were my
seventh, sometimes when moonlight splashes
sweetly, just so I touch my hair in a way
that's carefully careless, hold my breath
as I briefly remember our time together.
dryness. I need things like you to be a part of
it, to share conversation/in the scarce greenways.
I grow on your ruin, hold you in my
living death, but I can live without you.

Let's keep infesting each other, just for
now, in this now we once had,
our porous dream, for as long as I can stay.
I miss you, and every other tree I've
Loved. The world, extinct, forgets,
but I'll remember in my own way a
short while, water the garden
we once had.