

Urban Wild_Life: Encounters with wild lives in the city

Mourning Song

Just a kerfuffle – a flap, no squawks.
A disturbance on the tiny roof terrace
Where a pigeon had nested in our planter
Under overgrown shrubs,
Her two small charges growing almost visibly beneath her.

And just her orange eye, without expression,
Looking outward from the place where her brood had been.

And the tiny torn-apart body fallen on the front step.
Just feathers and viscera and the seeds it had been fed from our bird feeder,
Gulping down its last meal in every expectation of the next,
Like the clothes you bought the weekend before you died.

I folded fallen tulip leaves into the composting bag, next to your remains
And could think of nothing to say as I lowered you into the bin.

Vaccine Day

Walking round in circles on the road at 5.45am.
I hadn't seen a hedgehog for so long – years? -
And this one was dazed, bloodied, tottering around the broken white line
And he wouldn't stay in the safety of the hedge where we guided him -
Just kept moving towards the worst place he could be.

These moments and meetings and stunted encounters,
Where dazed from some trauma, you sway into view and
We are helpless, hands open and wide.
Without action, without answers.

An inappropriate though fierce feeling for your plight.
It doesn't quite cut it – I know. It doesn't matter,
But we are mattering and so are you.

I only wanted to save your life, make you safe,
Rid myself of the drops of dread and fear and sadness -
Imagine you safe, recovered, re-united,
Walking in a straight line again.

Lone Deer

We've seen you before – on the edge of the river,
Cocooned in the long grasses of the meadow,
Between the trees and stepping across the woodland path.
Today you met us on the path that leads to the road –
a busy road, even at this hour.

We stopped running and looked.
You looked back and skittered further down the path,
towards the humming cars and churning lorries.
So we withdrew, found another way out,
tried to meet you at the other end
And drive you back to safe, green places
But you had gone, again.

Another half-formed encounter – truncated, fearful
And partially understood though always deeply felt.

I wished for your unseen life to be one of relative safety, comfort and repose,
But here – in the heart of the city – that seemed unlikely.
Just a story to tell yourself in the absence of a fuller opening.

Heron

An ancient, primeval being, balanced on the
Cross bars of an abandoned bike in the river -
Still, silent, compressed.

Heron below the bridge, concertina-ed and contained,
Without movement or intention.
Still there when we walk back across,
Echoing another time into this one,
Denying the expansive moment of
Lift-off and release.

Bat Walk

Walking through our green, morning places as the sun sets,
All is shifted and transposed to a different key – it feels like another place now.
The branches are aligned with the sky and earth in a new pattern – new shapes emerge.

The evening is warm and we are seeking bats.
When we see them, wheeling among the tree-tops,
it reveals another layer of life and being
That we pass over and run past -
A re-seeing of this now-familiar place

There is an eeriness to the meadow at dusk,
Within its encircling cedars, with its whispering grasses.

Being dropped into these spaces still does not remove the cling of the city,
the urban mesh in which they are held.

Community Garden

The beds are hard and dry – little grows.

We approach their low-level maintenance with some fatigue – they give so little back.

Young, fresh plants wither and die there.

Some are removed or destroyed, the structure of the bed is displaced.

It is hard to be positive.

Occasionally, an unexpected bloom surprises and delights – the crocuses that return in the early Spring – but mostly it feels barren, swallowing up efforts and hopes and offering little in return.

The ground remains hard and that uneven feeling – the unease and dread – persists.

Giant Hogweed

Rising majestically on the banks of the river each summer,

Brought here from the high reaches of the Caucasus, from South Russia and Georgia,

From those high and treacherous peaks that we reached on a dirt road in a 4x4.

Up there it gasps for air at altitude, seeks nourishment in rocky outcrops.

Down here, it sinks its roots deep into the warm wet earth of the riverside.

It breathes the temperate air, it thrives and flourishes.

Huge, trunk-like stems, with burning sap and umbrella-like white sprays of flowers on top.

Haz-matted rangers spray it with chemicals, signs warn us away,

Every year there are burns that remain on human skin, activated by sunlight.

It is never defeated – it rises and grows strong every summer and from afar,

its gathering and growth is breath-taking.

From another angle though, in a different light, it marks a degraded and compromised ecology,

Surrendered to a more powerful invader that threatens and damages –

An imbalanced, 'tipped' space.

Brought here by colonising plant hunters – those that named and classified and collected

And transported, then dropped these species here to grow as exotic curiosities in English gardens.

Now it overruns and resists and extends and bullishly occupies our riversides.

How to see this wild life and its presence amongst us, its colonising of the river banks –

As invasive and threatening, a foreign force to be battled and ultimately defeated?

Or as a fierce and stretching, wilful and powerful life?