

What do you value in the natural world?

Hannah Lowe

I'm a life-long city dweller, but I value the natural world deeply, and more so since I had my son, Rory. He's five and a burgeoning naturalist with a small library of books about sea-life, trees and birds.

Our most common interactions with nature are in the city parks. But last summer we had a scary experience in our local park. After days of sweltering heat, it finally rained: torrential, gutter-swelling rain that lasted all afternoon. We were so glad for rain. We live in a high-rise flat with big glass windows, so the heat had been really intense. After the rain, we walked to the park to enjoy the cooler air. But as we were taking our usual circuit, a tree – a thirty-foot oak to be precise – came crashing down onto the path behind us. It missed falling on us by a second or two. It well might have killed us.

Back home, I emailed the local authority to report it. And when our local tree officer (a post I didn't know existed) phoned in the morning, he explained the phenomenon of 'summer limb drop' – when trees dry out in summer and lose their branches, particularly after prolonged dry and then wet weather. He told me a whole tree falling was most likely caused by the extreme weather conditions we'd experienced – conditions, scientists tell us, that are a consequence of the unfolding climate crisis.

Rory had been distraught in the park. He refused to walk under any trees on the way home, and didn't want to return to that park for weeks after, and I was reminded of how it will be his life that bears the brunt of the effects of our advancing environmental disaster. He will grow up into a world of extreme weathers and collapsing trees.

I started to write a poem about the tree, but, as I have found many times before, some subjects haven't always reached fruition when you go to write about them. What you think you'll write about is often the thing you end up leaving out – but I hope this poem reflects some of my anxiety about what the next generation will inherit.

The Weather

The man is standing on the windy podium,
his hair lifting like an orange halo.
I won't say his name because all day
my son has chanted it repeatedly
the way he chants *Minecraft!* or *McDonalds!*
He's five, and marinated in TV.

The man's mouth is moving. Whatever
he's saying, I'm hearing him deny
the weather – the forest fires, the deep
Midwest freeze, an iceberg twice the size
of New York City snapping off Antarctica.
No use in sending him the letter

I've been writing in my head

about the floods coming closer,
the heat last summer which made us twist
like worms under glass. No air. Too hot
to think. We spent half of August
on the high bleachers of the ice-rink.

Now recycling is a form of prayer.
I'm watching his mouth move. The face
with its perennial tan, the pink mouth
sucking in air. When he denies,
he's really saying, *After I'm gone*
there'll be no here, no there.

I've been worrying at the weather
for weeks when it should have been
years. The hot spell in February.
I pull on a summer dress, thinking
if the weather girl is happy what's
the harm? Inside, a shrill alarm

keeps going off. When my son asks
will the earth last until infinity, I tell him no.
He wants to know why. I'm sorting plastics
while he marches the lounge chanting
infinity infinity! and a winter fly
buzzes madly at our balcony door.

Hannah Lowe

Hannah Lowe was born in Essex in 1976 to a white English mother and Afro-Chinese Jamaican father. Broadly, Lowe's work is concerned with migration histories, multicultural London and the complex legacies of the British Empire. Her first poetry collection, *Chick* (Bloodaxe, 2013), blended these political concerns with a deeply personal and elegiac commemoration of her father, and won the Michael Murphy Memorial Award for Best First Collection. Her second collection, *Chan* (Bloodaxe, 2016) is about the life and untimely death of her father's cousin, the jazz saxophonist, Joe Harriott, and in *Ormonde* (Hercules Editions, 2014), she excavates the story of the SS *Ormonde*, on which her father migrated to Britain. *The Neighbourhood* (Outspoken Press, 2019) explores how communities respond to the pressures of austerity, gentrification and deportation. Her latest poetry collection is *The Kids* (Bloodaxe, 2021). Lowe's memoir, *Long Time, No See* (Periscope, 2015) was Radio 4's Book of the Week. She has also been Poet in Residence at Keats House, and a writer on the Colonial Countryside Project.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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