

## **Making Jokes About Farts and The Serious Matter of the Daily Walk**

Emily Zobel Marshall

For so many of us, the natural world has been a space of refuge and comfort during the traumas of the pandemic. In March 2020 we watched spring unfurl with the wonder of children who had never before observed this yearly happening. We found ourselves contained in our houses and local areas and it were as if, oblivious to the news of death on the airways, spring decided to put on an unrivalled show of colour and vigour for us. We learnt to observe - many of us had more time to do so without the busyness of our work commutes and school runs. Some of us discovered new walks in our local areas and marvelled at the splendour of the natural world to be found on our doorsteps. Those of us who could do so were privileged; we were not ill or dying or working nightshifts stacking supermarket shelves or trying to save lives in overwhelmed hospitals.

By the summer of 2020 we had grown tired of people waxing lyrical about how they found inspiration and solace in birdsong and flowers – nature could not resolve or properly balm the sufferings of loss, fear and isolation. Yet finding joy in nature was something we still carried forward into the months of confinement ahead. We held onto that flame, kindled it with walks, by buying binoculars to watch garden birds, boots to hike in, telescopes to gaze at stars above the city. We longed to feel something more expansive, more important than our vulnerable, fragile human selves.

Not necessarily a benevolent force, but something that suggested freedom, calm, connectedness and growth.

These poems are dedicated to the natural world as a site of healing and were all written during the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic my seven-year-old daughter Rose was undergoing treatment for leukaemia; we had to shield her, which made those early months extremely isolating but also tightly knotted our family bond. She ended her cycle of chemotherapy a few months later, in May, and has been well since. In those early days, we packed a lunch and thermos flask and daily urged her and her brother, Theo, on a local walk. I look back at this ritual with real tenderness. We took the Usborne bird-spotters guide, wild-flower-spotting books and even animal-poo-spotting books. Rose and I learnt the names of hedgerow and woodland flowers that sounded like poetry: Summer Snowflake, Fairy Flax and Tormentil. We tried to keep the atmosphere on our daily walks light; we told stories and made jokes about farts. They kept us grounded and connected us to a world far beyond the daily death count. They allowed us to survive.

### **Making Jokes About Farts (March 2020)**

For Theo

We sit on a fallen tree trunk, you and I  
making jokes about farts

Fingers of Spring sunshine reach towards us  
and for a moment, we forget  
the past week of reckoning  
our seven long black nights  
when only sleep eased anxiety  
and sports stadiums gaped empty

and the woman in the mask  
tried to operate the traffic lights with her elbow  
while we all looked on  
two meters apart  
as many more souls passed

The world pauses  
Beijing's grey lid lifts  
Venetians see a slate-blue dolphin swim  
in their now crystalline canals  
a smile on its lips

But you and I can only wait  
and watch  
and try to laugh  
by joking about farts

### **Anchoring (April 2020)**

For Yeni

I am  
unanchored  
heavy as potatoes  
but hold me to the light  
and sunbeams pierce my cracks  
blow against my face  
and I'll scatter  
a dandelion puff  
on the evening breeze

I cannot quench my thirst  
for touch  
I am parched  
from chatting over hedges,  
gates and doorsteps  
two meters apart

So I wait for darkness  
greet a whisper of a moon

hear ambulances sing  
as death stalks every airwave  
in this taciturn night

While in the woods Spring rushes, ruffling bluebell rugs  
scattering wild garlic, unfurling ferns  
making ready for a dawn clamorous with birdsong

but I am still

detached

without touch

and in all of this, no kiss

for anchoring

### **I Observe (May 2020)**

From my pillow  
I observe how each day seems the same  
and yet its differences are vast  
I have been 'gifted' time  
but it slips like water  
through fingers

Beyond my window  
the neighbour tunes into a new station  
sings gently while he digs  
his dog, grown tired of its own barking  
dreams noisily in the dark corner of the yard  
two white butterflies air-dance across my garden  
compounding my confinement;

My observations are frustrated here  
so I walk the woods

note the slope of evening light across the birch  
the way catkins cling to twigs  
somebody has left a green glove on the bridge  
it wasn't here yesterday  
and today  
the woodpecker is more determined in its hammering

### **The Daily Walk (January 2021)**

The house is always the same  
The house is always the same

and it compresses, crumples and contains me  
I am folded, halved, perhaps quartered  
reduced by monotony of walls  
by repellent familiarity of rooms  
which resist the constant square up  
won't brighten with supermarket flowers  
will not throw off the stench  
of last week's pot plant cat piss

my face a crumpled tissue  
states the mirror;  
folds around my eyes  
threaten to consume sight  
with the heft of sleeplessness

So pull on frayed boots  
and slowly greying thermals  
stinking worse than yesterday (I don't care)  
head for the daily trudge  
through winter woods and mud

Thaw reveals catkins (to soon?)  
drips from early buds of sycamore and ash  
snowdrops push barefaced  
through dank leaves  
night frost embracing fragile stems  
ushering signs of change

## **On the Lake (February 2021)**

Out there on the lake  
where the lapwings glide  
wind slaps water into frenzied waves  
while on the fell tops ragged sheep  
turn bottoms to the sleet  
and wait for warmer days

Let this squall dry tears  
cried for smaller things  
than lake and land  
and sky

Let it burn my cheek  
and hurl me into clashes  
between the clouds and moors  
then guide me home at dusk  
with the moon beneath the water  
and a curlew's rising call

### **Emily Zobel Marshall**

Dr Emily Zobel Marshall is a Reader in Postcolonial Literature at the School of Cultural Studies at Leeds Beckett University. She teaches courses on African-American, Caribbean, African and Black British literature. She is an expert on the trickster figure in the folklore, oral cultures and literature of the African Diaspora and has published widely in these fields.

Emily has also established a Caribbean Carnival Cultures research platform and network that aims to bring the critical, creative, academic and artistic aspects of carnival into dialogue with one another.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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