

## What do you value most in the natural world?

Priya Sharma

Studies have proven the benefits of nature on our mental health, but I don't think we need a clinical paper to tell us that. Interestingly, studies also demonstrate that even a *photograph* of a forest, shore or mountain range helps our sense of wellbeing. Subjects reported feelings of relief and consolation.

I'm fortunate to have a garden. I learnt its true value during the collective trauma of the last few years. Like everyone, I felt the seismic shift in our world caused by a virus just nine nanometres in size. Every day was uncertain. I am a doctor. How would I protect my loved ones, my patients, and myself? Facing the reality that I couldn't. Patients and neighbours died. Friends contracted Covid and still haven't recovered. It's changed their lives. A colleague confided to me that they often cried on their way to work. I never cried. I think it was shock. I remained in fight mode for the longest time.

I'd previously taken the luxury of having a garden for granted. It was a constant in the slew of constant changes as we tried to stay ahead of the crisis. I had a

continual feeling of suppressed panic and being confined within the walls of work or home. Watching my garden through the window was a lesson in mindfulness. The garden's brick walls need pointing, only held up by ivy in some places. Squirrels and foxes pass through it, but my favourite visitors are more modest. The garden is a haven for sparrows and a bold robin. He's a flash of red in the green, and territorial when faced with larger birds. Survival is an act of audacity when you're so small. Covid reminded me that we're small too, here all too briefly. When I thought about that I was terrified but then remembered the robin. If he could face it, so could I.

As soon as I fill the bird feeder it's swamped by rowdy starlings. They're a flurry of energy in complex colours; green and purples overlaid with brassy gold. Plump pigeons and collared doves gather beneath them on the grass, pecking at the scattered seed they've dropped. They've wrecked the lawn but I don't care. They calm my racing, overanxious mind.

I've come to recognise a particular white dove. She flies down from the roof when I hang out the washing. She follows me around, her head bobbing. She gave me an odd sort of continuity during the pandemic. I look forward to seeing her. I know it's cupboard love on her part but I don't mind.

We also have shy magpies. Sometimes herring gulls as we're close to the sea. I even saw a woodpecker once, on the stump of the old cherry tree. Some of our guests are seasonal. When the silver birch blossoms with pale mustard-coloured

catkins in the spring, goldfinches gather there. They're blow-ins, gone as soon as they've stripped out all the seed. *Some things are transient*, they told me, *and that's exactly as it should be*. Sometimes, when I felt like we were losing, they reminded me that the world keeps on turning and everything will come around again, and I took great comfort from that.

### **Priya Sharma**

Priya Sharma's fiction has appeared in venues such as *Interzone*, *Black Static*, *Nightmare*, *The Dark* and *Tor*. She's been anthologised in several of Ellen Datlow's *Best Horror of the Year* series and Paula Guran's *Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror* series, among others. Her short story 'Fabulous Beasts' was a Shirley Jackson Award finalist and won a British Fantasy Award. *All the Fabulous Beasts*, a collection of her some of her work, available from [Undertow Publications](#), was a Locus Award Finalist, and won a British Fantasy Award and Shirley Jackson Award. *Ormeshadow*, her first novella (available from [Tor](#)), won a Shirley Jackson Award and a British Fantasy Award.

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

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