



Linden Katherine McMahan



# HOLD FAST

Poems by  
Linden Katherine McMahon

Back from the Brink

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Cover design by Linden Katherine McMahon

Cover photo: Red Hemp-nettle at Cholderton Estate © W Legg

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## Introduction

In 2018-20, I was an artist in residence with Back from the Brink: a hugely ambitious conservation project working to save England's most threatened species from extinction. My job was to come up with creative projects that connected people to the plants, animals, and fungi living close to their homes.

I developed five projects exploring and celebrating the work of Back from the Brink – including a new anthology of speculative poetry and fiction, lanterns which spoke to endangered moths, a collaborative artwork celebrating the Black-tailed Godwit, and a fanzine for the beings of Rockingham Forest – including the Chequered Skipper, successfully reintroduced in a secret location nearby.

As part of these projects, I wrote poems that became part of events and installations alongside work from participants of all ages. I wanted to bring together all the things I'd written in one place – this little pamphlet. I'd really encourage you to also read the responses from other people who took part: in [\*Fans of the Forest\*](#) and [\*We Are A Many-Bodied Singing Thing\*](#), both available to download for free from the Back from the Brink website.

The very first project that I did took me to my home county of North Yorkshire, where I lived from the ages of seven to nineteen. I stayed with my parents in their village between the Moors and the Wolds, helping in the garden, eating food they had grown, and getting reacquainted with the birds who are regulars at their feeders.

I was working with Colour in the Margins, a project saving plants that grow in the edgelands of arable fields and the other species that depend on them. I trailed the places where some of the most threatened wildflowers have been seen – and then sown,

encouraged, and taken care of. With help from the project officers, I found out that corn buttercup and red hemp-nettle had come back to some of the places I knew from my childhood.

I drove through Scarborough, the Vale of Pickering, and the Wolds, and visited fields, old quarries, nature reserves, and forests. At the same time, I read about the wildflowers: I found out more about the reasons for their decline, and the possibilities for coexistence; I read about the traditions surrounding them, such as putting speedwell seeds in the seams of clothes for journeys; I learned about the ecosystems they support, and the efforts of farmers and conservationists to create spaces in our arable landscapes for them to flourish.

During the project, I thought a lot about what it means to be from this landscape, and what it means to be connected to it. As an LGBTQ+ person, I left in part to find more community (as many of us do). But there's no escaping the sense of responsibility and affection I feel for these places (and I'm not sure I'd want to).

I wrote a series of poems about the experience, which are included in this pamphlet, and ran a drop-in day at one of my old haunts – Scarborough Library, where I'd spent countless Saturdays finding books and becoming a writer.

Later that year, I was part of the Godwit Festival at Welney Wetlands Centre – utterly delighted that this beanstalk of a bird got its own festival, and revelling in spending a day in the hide watching avocet chicks wade around. I worked with visitors to the festival to make poetry mobiles for the birds, and brought it all together in a collective poem, *To Fly Adventurous*. I turned this into an artwork, which now lives at Welney.

The other poem in this pamphlet was part of the work I did with Shifting Sands project, in the incredible, unique landscapes of the

Brecks. Working with local Scouts, Cubs, and Woodcraft Folk, we made lanterns which shone out messages to the endangered species of the area, especially moths. I was fascinated by the Basil Thyme Case Bearer Moth, who needs one particularly plant to survive. This poem was inked onto a lantern in the shape of the moth itself, which took its place among the young peoples' offerings.

Working with human communities and their non-human neighbours has been a joy and an education. There is so much possibility for connection between species, and the more we see them for who they are – one by one, as *Back from the Brink* does – the better we can live reciprocally and responsibly with them.

To get to know your own neighbours a little better, I've included some activities you might like to try out in your own area – whether that's your windowsill, balcony, back garden, local park, a nearby nature reserve, or your favourite spot in the woods or on the beach.

Linden Katherine McMahon

## Case Bearer

I used to think that moths came from the moon  
and were forever trying to get back to it.

Little moth, I said,

I know that feeling, beating  
yourself against the shine singing

*home home home*

in a voice that no-one but bats can hear.

But now I'm grown I know  
that moths come from Earth:  
from soft dark soil  
and cool leaves,  
from the break into the light  
as something new,  
from the fit of new tongue to flower  
which whistles sweetness.

They are so much from Earth  
that the Basil Thyme Case Bearer Moth  
needs one particular flower for winter,  
evolved together closer  
than kin, wove their lives  
over eons and ancestors,  
became home.

And so are we:  
right down to the outbreath of trees  
to our inbreath, the way our hands curl  
around a branch perfectly, how the branch  
is made of light and air.

We pick up a good stick, casual pilgrims,  
and the fit of that tight curve brings us home.

Little moth, I said,  
I know that feeling: the turn  
and change, the new light,  
the dark beneath it,  
how everything  
cradles.

## To Fly Adventurous

I saw a river when I ran  
over the bridge  
I heard my feet  
thumping  
I spy birds  
rising and falling.

Spiky caterpillar  
green and tiny.  
A yellow and green wasp.  
Black and white duck that looked soft.  
Crickets squeaking.  
People's feet clip-clopping.  
Swishing grass  
Ducks quack.  
Splashing – bloop bloop.  
Cold slippery snails:  
I was excited  
to see what I could find.

A russet bank appears  
then through my scope a hundred birds leap  
into focus. The kick kick – sharp and loud,  
orange and burnt cinnamon,  
soft browns sitting,  
flashes of monochrome  
in flight – hard lines, delicate but sharp.  
Probing beaks  
squidging through mud.

Dear Godwit,  
I did not know  
there were only 50 breeding pairs,  
or so, in the UK.  
And now godling  
chicks have been helped to hatch  
at Welney  
to fly adventurous  
across the world.

Dear Godwit,  
how many bugs and worms do you need to eat  
before you feel full?  
Do your enormous feet get in the way?  
What is the longest you've ever flown?  
How do you change colour with the seasons?

I hope you are getting on well and finding plenty of food.  
Are there floods this year?  
Do you know why you are called godwits?

How is the water on your long legs?  
The lap of wavelets on your knees?  
What does your beak know?  
How is the wind under your flexing feathers?  
Are your eggs warm?  
Does the down fall from your chicks?  
What does your nest say?  
Where do you remember?  
What grasses, what mud, what other sun and sky?  
What stars and magnets pull you home?

Dear humans,  
We see you in your nests of stone and glass.  
Why don't you run through lakes,  
swim in grass?  
Are your feet heavy on the tarmac?  
Do you wish you had soft feathers, light bones?  
Our nests hold sun and mud,  
our chicks' voices twine through reeds.  
We see you still and sit and grow watchful.  
What do you take with you  
when you leave?

*A collective poem by Linden Katherine McMabon  
and visitors to Welney Wetlands Centre, including:*

*Hannah Torkington*

*James Torkington*

*Theo Torkington*

*Kate Oliver*

*Clara Oliver*

*Jesse Oliver*

*Wren Oliver*

*Olivia Peeling*

*Jonathan Peeling*

*Rebecca Lee*

*Jess Owen*

*Debbie Sweet*

*And anonymous contributors*

## Homecoming

The first breath of cold clean air  
at the threshold of the station  
and here I am.

I spiral my head in the car  
to look up at the constellations  
awkward in the window  
gasping in their indifferent light.

I am small here.  
The ghosts are longing to be big enough.

I chose to leave,  
and I am here to chase  
tiny things which left  
with no goodbye, just  
disappeared like witches  
in clouds of herbicide.

I will not see them here: the seasons  
are all wrong. But I follow my roots  
to theirs, say their names like spells:

red hemp-nettle  
corn buttercup  
interrupted brome.

I see pheasants, but no pheasant's eye.  
The ghosts of speedwells  
wish me good travels; I long  
for their seeds as charms in my seams.

I feel them like sisters  
tied through our rhizomes,  
my mother's leeks built from the same soil,  
and more of it in me with every bowl of soup I eat.

I left, too, because I didn't fit  
with the order here: I was too queer  
to stay. They were unproductive,  
disorderly, just weeds.

We scattered parts behind  
to hold fast  
to the possibility  
of returning.

## Corn Buttercup

Driving, December fog:  
turned earth  
right to the horizon  
all else gone.

It takes effort  
to see summer green  
to see old mix-and-match colours  
among furrows, along edges.

Hypnotised by fog and road,  
driving with only stopped-short  
headlight beams, crystallised:  
trusting that the road is still there,

like dreaming  
corn buttercup  
finding seeds,  
and planting.

## Edgelands

How suddenly  
a landscape can immerse you:  
forest trails spread with  
shed needles, intense pale orange  
that the camera has no hope of capturing.  
The trees draw in,  
all shadow and paint,  
the tree stumps slate slick with rain.  
It is the only real place:  
the winding path,  
mosses and bracken and shrubs,  
bare, wet trees rushing upwards  
like slow dark fireworks.

The path spits me out  
near a sawmill, the sharp-sweet  
smell of cut timber taking  
over, the thump and buzz  
rush back in.

The sudden nature  
reserve is guarded:  
Hebridean sheep look at me warily and trot  
away. They are eating the scrub through winter  
so the flowers can come through.  
An earthwork guards the top side.  
I dream of slow worms  
in the dry stone wall.

Red hemp-nettle was found here  
when we thought it might be gone,

quietly open-mouthed,  
sudden whisper.

Now the sheep make space for it.  
Welcomed, it blooms  
with company,  
above limestone,  
beneath solid teeth.

## Hope

It's a skein of fat Canada geese  
rambling leisurely across the flooded road  
ignoring your car's inching,  
and the bus coming the other way;  
it's laughing and laughing  
at how much they don't give a damn  
by yourself  
in the driver's seat.

It's fourteen plants  
from thirteen precious seeds  
a miracle worthy of scriptures  
still to be written  
about those who persevere.

*It's grows on basic scree.*

It's a new technique for collection  
one hundred seeds in a biscuit tin,  
then thousands for the seedbank.

It's one more hedgerow;  
it's knowing that the old ones  
were homes, it's knowing that  
we have always grown up together.

It's thinking it's so quiet  
then closing my eyes to hear half a dozen  
different kinds of bird:  
even though I know there should be more  
there is so much life in the silver needles

threading subtle shades  
through crow's caw.

It's 'quarry (dis)' on the map  
and forest on the eye  
and ankle-turning stones on the feet  
and being grateful for their grip  
when the mud sets in.

It's the brindled feather  
saved by my father  
laid on a small cloth.

It's the old man with the wire-haired  
dogs saying, you won't see many flowers  
round here now, but if you go up  
High Dale or Low Dale there are big banks  
along the roads where primulas grow  
and they're that sheltered  
that on a day like this  
they might just open  
for a moment.

## Writing activities

*Choose a spot that you like where you can see some non-human nature close by. This could be your windowsill, balcony, back garden, local park, a nearby nature reserve, or your favourite spot in the woods or on the beach. Take a pen and notebook, and have a go! Don't worry about making it perfect, or even other people seeing it. This can be just for you.*

Write a sentence about something you can experience with each of your senses right now: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. Add in how you feel. What appeals to you? Why? Is there anything less pleasant? Why is it less appealing?

Write a letter to an animal, plant, or fungi you see often in this spot. What would you like to say to them? What questions would you like to ask them?

Now write their reply. You can mix in some of your sensory observations if you like.

Interview an animal, plant, or fungi as if you were a journalist interviewing a famous band or other celebrity. What do the fans want to know?

We're finding out more all the time about how trees communicate with each other, through the fungi that live underground, and through chemicals that they release into the air. If you can see some trees where you are, write some dialogue between them – what do you think they are saying to each other? What do they have to say about the things they see around them?

## Acknowledgements

With enormous thanks to Emma Burt for all her work and support on this and other Back from the Brink arts projects.

With thanks to the Back from the Brink team and all the Project Officers who have supported arts projects and events over the last two years.

A massive thank you to the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the People's Postcode Lottery – without whom Back from the Brink would not have been possible.

