

## Fiction section

Edited by **Joe Gray**

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### Introducing a new section

As David Lodge wrote in *The Art of Fiction*: “I have always regarded fiction as an essentially rhetorical art – that is to say, the novelist or short story-writer persuades us to share a certain view of the world for the duration of the reading experience.”

More than anything else, it is this rhetorical potential that appeals to me as editor of what is a new section in *The Ecological Citizen*. For at a time of great uncertainty about the future conditions that life is going to face on Earth, even in the near term, and when readers of non-fiction are increasingly wearied by facts and growing warier by the day of misinformation, fiction offers a powerful alternative means of conveying messages of deep import, be they ones that will help shift mindsets or those that will directly inspire action. Drawing from personal experience, to give an example, I found Ed Abbey’s *Monkey Wrench Gang* to be powerful both in shaping the development of my own Earth ethic and in motivating me to go on to take direct action in defence of the Earth’s wild creatures and places.

What we are seeking to publish here, in particular, are stories which: first, are set on the Earth that we know, that we knew, or that we might some day experience; secondly, offer rich descriptions of places and characters, be they non-human or human; and, thirdly, have a plot (*i.e.*, some *this-affects-that* relationships between goings-on).

Within these bounds, we have a preference for stories in which the concerns of non-human actors are conveyed without imposing a human-like perception and understanding of the world on them. The genuine interests and conceivable psychology of these agents should be more than sufficient to merit the empathy of readers. And I would argue that anthropomorphism, at least in some cases, risks devaluing or belittling these. Anyone unconvinced of the potential for drama to arise from the lives of other-than-human beings should watch the scene from the spectacular and stunning nature film *Microcosmos* in which a scarab beetle rolls a ball of dung (this is available on YouTube but can be viewed within DuckDuckGo’s non-data-harvesting interface here: <https://tinyurl.com/ymr7y9na>).

Considering the mental capacity of non-humans in regard to the possibilities for fiction, EM Forster – in his *Aspects of the Novel* (an edited

transcript of a series of lectures given in 1927) – wrote: “[T]he actors in a story are usually human [...] Other animals have been introduced, but with limited success, for we know too little so far about their psychology. There may be, probably will be, an alteration here in the future [...] [U]ntil it comes, we may say that actors in a story are, or pretend to be, human beings.”

First, let me commend him, belatedly, on his use of the word ‘Other’ before ‘animals’, thus succinctly dissolving the human–nature dualism. And, secondly, let me excitedly reinforce the idea that scientific discoveries in non-human psychology can widen the bounds of fiction. Thirdly, however, let me humbly suggest that Forster was rather-too-dismissive of the merits of non-humans as loci of concern for readers of fiction. I imagine that people in 1927 knew, for instance, that dogs enjoyed affection and disliked mistreatment. And if you cannot make a story out of that, then I would question your credentials as a writer. (Relatedly, I suggest that Jack London’s short story *Bâtard*, from the first decade of the twentieth century, never made it onto Forster’s reading list.)

But I must, now, return to the main flow of this introduction. And here I will relate the most important point of all about the kind of fiction that we are seeking to publish. What we would like to receive, above all else, are pieces that in some way further the ecocentric worldview. This means that while stories which place humans as central characters are welcomed, if they consider ecological issues merely, or mostly, in terms of their implications for that one species, they are unlikely to be accepted. To put it another way, ignoring tragedy on a scale that dwarfs all others – that is, the awful plight, today, of innumerable non-human beings – renders a piece of fiction, I contend, mere escapism at best.

All that remains for me to do is introduce our first ever piece of fiction published in the journal: *Pigs*, by Tamsin Pearson. I found this story to ooze sensitivity and honesty, to inspire empathy for non-humans, and to offer some humorous observations, while being rich in those little details that really set you thinking. In short, it is my favourite kind of fiction.

*Joe Gray*

For further information on submitting fiction please visit:

<https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/submitting-fiction.html>

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## Pigs

Tamsin Pearson

My daughter acquired a piglet. On her way home from school, there was a commotion: a livestock transporter had taken a wrong turn and jackknifed around the mini roundabout at the bottom of our hill. What with the precarious leaning and an altercation with a lamppost, one of the trailer doors had swung open and some disoriented captives had spilled out.

Piglets make an attention-grabbing noise at the best of times; one in particular was stumbling in a circle and squealing its distress most querulously. Molly couldn't resist trying to comfort the poor creature. Assessing the scene, she decided that the lorry was destined for the abattoir. Fired with a passion of injustice, she took the executive decision to liberate the piglet by stuffing it up her jumper.

I peered around the back kitchen door, wondering about the source of the splashing and squeaking. Molly stared back with the frozen terror of anticipated parental disapprobation. Actually, I had only two injunctions: firstly, she should not move it from one place of captivity to another—it was not going to live in a cage—and, secondly, unfortunately, she could not release it into the wild, because it was not wild. Here Molly pointed out that 'it' was actually 'she', because of the neat array of studs across her belly.

Not knowing what stage of weaning the piglet was at, we could only offer water, which seemed welcome, and an old towel for comfort. Whatever had happened to her, she must have been traumatised, having been separated from whomever and whatever she had been familiar with. The distressed squealing only subsided while Molly was with her; thus we found ourselves at that impasse.

I called the farmer whose land abuts ours. Angus has a gait you can recognise literally a kilometre away. Heather moor and machair is not conducive to striding; consequently, he has achieved this efficient pumping effort, so that he appears like a tweed-upholstered steam engine: pistons at the bottom, whistle at the top.

Promptly, Angus scissored over the back fence, bearing a huge sack and dragging an empty plastic bin. Apparently this feed would cover the basics, and could be supplemented with a wide range of kitchen scraps.

Meanwhile, Molly had named her new companion Penelope. Recognising that sharing her bedroom would not be an option, she presented me with an irrefutable plan: she would put her brother's sleeping bag in the back kitchen. Thus the pair of them would magically and hygienically bond.

While we consulted Angus about a longer-term solution, Bill, our community police officer, rang the doorbell. He was trying so hard to stifle a smirk that he appeared, quite misleadingly, to be winking at me. He exhaustively explained about the navigational incident, the wandering livestock, the chagrined driver, the irate farmer, the tangled traffic, and so on. Had I seen any unattended farm animals? He seemed to be concerned less about welfare and more about the repercussions of transport stupidity.

I stifled my own smirk and carefully responded: notwithstanding my personal philosophy that one creature cannot be owned by another, I had not seen any domesticated animals, 'owned' by any local livestock farmers, wandering about unattended. There was no comedically-timed oinking off-stage. Bill issued the standard advice: not to approach any such individuals, which might be dangerous; then hirpled back down the hill, still smirking.

Back at the kitchen conference, Angus was struck by inspiration: a landowner over toward the Cairngorms had recently established a herd, a drove, or possibly a parcel of pigs – there are as many collective nouns for pigs as humans have found uses for them. They were to perform land management

functions, such as thinning out scrub and saplings from wooded areas, and churning the boggy soil to increase the diversity of wildflowers.

We met this landowner, Trish, and approved her livestock-conservation experiment, and her native plant monomania, and even her meringue hairdo. Happily, Penelope would be welcomed as a herd member. The herd was immaculate; in contrast, Jim, the herder, appeared to have been dragged through a hedge sideways, and to have brought most of it with him as evidence.

Several visits ensued to acclimatise Penelope and gradually leave her with her new family for longer periods. For a few weeks Penelope settled in fine. Molly visited her on Saturdays by charming Angus into giving her a lift on a series of pretexts. We were all happy that Penelope was squealing less and gaining weight.

On the fourth weekend, my son, Nicky, and I went along too. When we arrived, Jim was loping into view – as always, authentically adorned with twigs, but today missing his grin. Molly was excited to greet Penelope on her return from foraging. However, Penelope was missing. Jim tried to cover his concern with an unwavering adherence to procedure: settle the rest of the herd safely in their quarters, then head back out to search.

We heard Penelope from some distance. With Molly echoing, the cacophony reached a crescendo. Jim and Nicky triangulated Penelope's squeals to a drainage gully surrounded by a few ancient pines. She was in the base of the gully, among long grass, beside a pile of scrub trimmings, trembling. The gully wasn't especially deep or enclosed, and Penelope appeared uninjured, so we were baffled why she hadn't rejoined the herd.

Molly rushed to comfort Penelope, but being lifted and petted made her even noisier. Any attempt to remove her produced unbearable squeals. Jim and I wandered around searching for any indication of the cause. I didn't know what I was looking for. Nicky ranged through the scrub, compulsively clicking his camera, and somehow the lens saw what we didn't: hiding, cowering under those scrub trimmings, was a smaller piglet with a darker complexion.

Molly glowered an accusation that Jim hadn't counted carefully enough. He tactfully, and with relief, pointed out that this piglet was not one of the herd.

Leaving Nicky circling Molly and the two piglets in a kind of camera corral, Jim and I searched further. We were so thankful that Molly wasn't with us when we discovered the carnage: at the side of a small clearing lay a sow with mutilated head and limbs. Several similarly eviscerated piglets were strewn nearby. I was overcome with nausea and had to walk away. Jim had a stronger constitution and could make a detailed visual assessment.

Jim told me that this massacre was not wild animals: no fox or wildcat would do such damage and leave the meat. Realising what he meant brought me another wave of nausea. The only animals that torture other animals for amusement are human.

Despite the glaring wrongness of the situation, we weren't equipped to assess what 'crime' might have been committed. We would need specialist advice about examining and recovering the bodies. I collected Molly and the two piglets; they seemed less distressed so long as they were together. Jim quietly asked Nicky if he felt able to graphically chronicle the site.

In the dazzle of shock, I found myself standing inside the pig pen, staring out across the moor. The fence wood felt less comforting than I needed; it hadn't been enough protection. Molly had taken the two piglets somewhere dark and cosy to soothe them. My mind homed in on one incongruity: how did a pregnant or nursing sow end up way out there?

Jim reappeared looking haggard. He'd contacted nearby farms and carefully enquired if they were missing a piglet. He'd made a joke of it, as if it were more likely—as Molly had silently accused him—that he'd simply miscounted. No takers. Farmers value livestock, even if only financially, and they tag them. That Jim hadn't mentioned multiple piglets or the sow confirmed my fears: he wasn't ready to announce that ghastly discovery yet.

Livestock owners don't misplace sows. I thought of the livestock transporter, but Jim considered it unlikely that any pig would walk thirty miles. Still, I called Bill with a similar careful enquiry about a found piglet. He had no claim either; the contents of the transporter had been accounted for or written-off. We were not wanted for pig rustling. Apparently whoever 'owned' these terribly unfortunate creatures didn't care. And the perpetrators of their treatment... Jim and I stared at each other, bewildered by the horror, trying to penetrate a mindset that was entirely alien to us.

Jim had also contacted Helen, a specialist vet at the University. As soon as she arrived, he took her over to the discovery site. The three of us made to go home. I expected Molly to make undeniable demands for Penelope and Peter, the new orphan, to come with us. However, without having seen the full horror, she seemed to accept that they were in the least worst place.

The following day we lugged kilos of windfall apples from the garden, as if food could somehow nullify the trauma. We were horribly nervous, trying not to anthropomorphise, yet still hearing the echoes of Penelope's cries. Penelope and Peter had settled in together, inseparably. They both remained clearly different from the rest of the herd, but, at least, not isolated.

Reports were made, officials notified, investigations launched. Jim gave me sight of Helen's analysis: it was impressively technical. I didn't know science was so advanced in this area, but then I wouldn't. Technically, we can track the buying and selling of pigs. Theoretically, incisions in flesh can be matched to a specific individual animal. Perhaps the perpetrators were not local, but moving a pig is not easy – ask that livestock transporter driver. Most of all, Helen had a straightforward conclusion: many of the incision marks on the pig flesh were caused by dogs, most likely terriers.

Newspapers picked up the story; Jim was interviewed by local radio; and there were the polarised perils of social media. Some thought piglets were adorable and wanted to keep them in handbags; some wanted to make them into handbags; some raged defiance at a perceived threat to their bacon butties; some condemned the mutilators to suffer a similar fate. I was labelled 'pig-woman', apparently an overlooked mythological chimera. Some felt I was interfering in a traditional way of life, persecuting the benevolent custodians of the land. After all, pigs are not people.

Right on cue, local game-shooting estates spluttered their umbrage at implications, bleating that they mostly used spaniels or Labradors – apparently the classier hunters’ choice of dog. Their shrill defensiveness, rather than sharing our horror at the atrocity, said a lot. The only animals that torture other animals for amusement are humans. And some of them train dogs to assist.

While the wheels of human justice ground, Molly and I visited the pigs. Across the moor, we exchanged waves with Trish, still identifiable through the drizzle by her phosphorescent meringue. She was marshalling a convocation of botanical experts bristling with arcane instruments and waterproof clipboards.

As Molly played hide and seek with Peter, Penelope considered me carefully. Distantly I heard Molly giggling, “Where are you hiding? Where did you come from?” I gazed back at Penelope. Where *did* she come from? I called Helen with some hypoxic notion about analysing teeth isotopes to establish geographical origin. She reckoned she could go one better.

When the case finally reached court, I took the first half, squeezing into the public gallery; I was keen to hear the evidence, the reasoning, the diversity of expertise brought to bear.

The transporter’s inmates had originated at a smallholding, whose livestock had failed to achieve an adequate ‘feed conversion rate’; the business had thus gone bankrupt and had been required to ‘liquidate’ its assets. An aspiring gamekeeper, with the appearance of flies buzzing around his head, had tried to expedite his entry credentials by taking advantage of that convenient ruin, and of one animal in too poor a condition for the abattoir – even those institutions of death draw a line. A vet from a nearby town had reported an unusual bacterial infection in a terrier, most likely from eating raw meat. Although not near a road, the pigs’ carcasses were reasonably near an access track on a neighbouring shooting estate.

Plausible, compelling, but not sufficient for legal redress. Nor would the conviction of one thrown character be restitution. Then Helen used genetic markers to show that Penelope and Peter were siblings. After that, I couldn’t see anything for tears.

Jim took the finale; he was keen for the result. I’m happier out here, getting muddy with the pig people; letting them be wild boar again.

As it turns out, the whole court business has been dwarfed by a second discovery: the hooves and snouts of Penelope and colleagues have unearthed and favoured some plant of international significance, with medicinal implications. Trish’s hair is shimmering with excitement: this plant—named something like ‘pig myrtle’—was previously thought extinct. Consequently, the entire area, especially, felicitously, including a portion of the adjoining estate, receives an immediate protective cordon. Activities are strictly curtailed.

Penelope expresses my feelings best: she quivers in a sort of porcine frisson, then trots away in search of further botanical delights.

### About the author

**Tamsin Pearson** is a writer and student based in central Scotland. For more information about her work, see: <https://digitalischemia.wordpress.com/>.