

## Fiction section

Edited by **Joe Gray** and **Taylor Hood**

Joe is a field naturalist and conservationist who lives on the island of Great Britain. He writes eco-fiction under the pen name Dewey Dabbar. Taylor is a Scottish naturalist whose background spans wildlife ecology and literary research.

Rewilding has grown in prominence among conservationists, and its spirit is increasingly shaping a wider cultural imagination. This broader ethos challenges the assumptions of an ecocidal modernity, envisioning a planet where humans rekindle their wild selves and our non-human kin live out untrammelled lives. It is in this sense that we present *Feral Lines*, a collection of unflinching but ultimately hopeful stories about nature's rebounding. We welcome similarly themed tales for consideration in future issues of *The Ecological Citizen*.



### Little Cub Leath Tonino

He felt ill. Had felt ill for weeks, months, maybe even years. But now, suddenly, it was too much. Not a background thing. Not some vague discomfort. Real pain. Sharp. Rushing him to the bathroom. Bending him over the toilet.

After an hour, an eternity, the vomiting stopped. He wiped drool from his chin. Opened his burning eyes. And what he saw made zero sense. It wasn't bile or blood. Wasn't palm oil or jet fuel. Wasn't bullets or beer bottles or

skyscrapers or supertankers or busted motherboards or syringes or rusty paint cans. Torn t-shirts, shredded flags. Chemical plants. Bones. No, it was all of these at once. Plus a body. Smaller than his pinky. Trying and trying and trying to swim, but mostly just sputtering, flailing, sinking.

Without a thought, he reached into the hell of the bowl and scooped the body up. And again what he saw made zero sense. Tar and glue coating the fur. Coal dust and plastic bags clotting the ears, nose, mouth. Chest heaving. Paws twitching. Tail knotted. Right there in his cupped hand, lying flat, the tiniest cougar.

*I refuse.*

*Little friend, little stranger, little cub.*

*I refuse your death.*

The voice both was and wasn't his own. He'd heard it before, decades ago perhaps. As a child. Walking the woods. It had been forever since he walked the woods. Longer than forever. Instantly, the rich scent of decaying leaves filled the bathroom. Shapes and colors and textures of his forgotten youth. Damp trails braided with roots, studded with rocks. Mosses spreading.

He flushed the toilet, slammed the lid shut.

*I refuckingfuse!*

Bit his lip and carried the poor creature away.

Come evening, though the miniature cougar remained in great danger, its condition had improved in response to a dozen drops of heavy cream offered via a napkin's soaked corner and a soft slipper placed beneath a reading lamp's warm yellow bulb. Night passed slowly. A terrible vigil of waiting, watching, worrying. But by dawn the cougar could stand, and by noon it could limp circles around the inside of the slipper, and by the second evening it could take solid food. Three days later, it snarled.

That was sweet music. Such sweet, sweet music. And that was merely the beginning. The cougar soon grew to the size of a banana. Then to the size of a ukulele. Then to the size of a coffee table. Then to the size of a cougar.

*Little cub, little friend.*

She prowled kitchen counters.

*This is wrong.*

She attacked couch cushions.

*You need the wild.*

She climbed walls.

*I'll miss your whiskers.*

She screamed.

*Thank you.*

And so they drove. And drove. And drove farther. And drove farther still. Out of the past and into the future. Out of confusion and into the woods. Drove until the car fell to pieces and she was sprinting, leaping, flashing, gone. Until he was walking, destination uncertain. Legs feeling strong, healthy. Tears rolling down his cheeks.

## After the End

Nomi McLeod

When we ended, they began.

First the shoots, unfurling everywhere. So many greens you could not name them all. The now-sweet air – alive with butterflies, wasps, bees. Those of us who were left to witness it were rendered speechless. We were delighted even – despite everything we had seen. It was as if the world had been holding its breath. Now, at last, it breathed out.

On that exhale came a thousand flowers. Dawn choruses to end sleep. It was like a symphony building; the birds, then the deer walking along roads, ears flicking, passing abandoned cars. Squirrels inside schools, knocking over pencil pots with their tails as they rushed to escape cats who had swiftly left the domestic behind. Meadows of flowers that grew up and up and concealed the fallen. Each coloured petal like a note; brightest red, thick yellows, shocks of blue as if the sky had shattered. The bleached skull-white of daisies peeping out of empty eye sockets.

Without consultation we agreed to never discuss the past. We looked away from the things we had once built. Our beloved right angles, rendered in grey concrete. High rises, set like faceless idols against the starry sky. We averted our eyes.

When we entered these buildings we sat on the floor, ignoring the chairs. We wanted nothing of what had led us here. We felt we had been spared. And we felt watched. Often, we were silent. The word ‘I’ began to wilt. It made less and less sense. When we did speak our voices were hushed. We sounded brash and guttural now. Unnatural.

It was better to glide along quietly. It was necessary to listen. We listened hard – not only for dangers but to the ghosts inside us. We felt sure the land could help us remember what we had once known. Namely, how to live here, like this.

Sure enough – there were lessons everywhere. The birds taught us how to go invisible – still and small enough to pass by without setting off their alarm calls. The sky proclaimed the coming weather in a hundred ways. We sheltered inside abandoned train carriages, laying across the soft seats, before the first drops even fell. Ivy grew across the windows.

Once, black against a white sky, we met a bear. An escapee maybe, or one released long ago when her captors realised what was happening. She stopped and stared at us. We stared back. Behind her bumbled two small ones, bear-children. Some of us wept. She was so much a mother we wondered how we had ever not seen it.

We stood still, waiting. She could attack us; we all knew now that mothers were the fiercest. But she walked on, deeper into her own story, forgetting us in an instant. After a moment, we walked on too.

Our own story was behind us. With each step it grows ever more indistinct, ever more softened. Blurred now with lichens and molds and moss.

## The Opening

Taylor Hood

Long before the city unsealed itself, a child knelt by a rift in the pavement, lips parting to ask how a whole forest could breathe in so tight a space. Though his parents scolded him and onlookers stifled laughter, the boy's words took root in those who heard them, quietly breaking down the walls around their hearts.

It was at a gap in a wall not far away that the vision of the child proved its power, for when a commuter glimpsed the tangle within, she slipped inside—missing her bus. Elsewhere, the boy's question appeared as a tear across the skin of a billboard, revealing the expanse of the sky to a startled magnate. A fortnight later, warehouse workers stopped stacking boxes and sparked a game of hide-and-seek amidst shelves tall as sylvan columns. And on that same night, in a downtrodden neighbourhood, a delinquent let fall a brick intended for a window and wrenched open a tree grate instead, feeling the hold of anger loosen.

Even when the boy was forgotten, his gesture lingered, shaping doubts and desires. Things that once bound the urbanites no longer seemed quite so important. Screens blinked out and planners lay closed. Gates swung upon their hinges, never to be shut again. Houses gathered dust in the absence of their owners, while lawns sprouted into a chaos of self-sown weeds and shrubs. People began to haunt the margins, hungering for wide ways, grasping at what lay on the other side of the known and staid.

But the hermit, alone, never abandoned his hovel.

He could only bide his time while those who remained to help creation along its course worked tirelessly. Each day, he would take another tin of food from his store and watch through narrow slats as the citizenry sundered slabs and toppled fencing, unseen lights flickering above the crowd. At first, he mistook their deeds for construction, but his tension eased when he caught their exclamations that the city's unsealing had sent the wild surging like seeds from a burst pod. Thus, he waited—patient, wary—for nature's return to soften sounds and drape the streets in shade.

He knew the waiting was over when a twig tapped against his door. Timorously, he crossed the threshold, passing beneath an archway of branches abutting the house. Further down the road, a weight shifted in his periphery. He let a smile surface as a deer emerged out of a thicket before bounding away. Turning into a side street, he paused again: neighbours gathered as a raven, perched on a shattered lamp, lifted from its nest and wheeled skyward.

Gradually, the hermit's fear receded as draughts swept through portals thrown wide all over the city, stirring the leaves that framed the openings in ripples. Spurred on by the breeze, his footsteps quickened into a sprint. With each stride, memories of youth unfurled, recalling hours spent running in woods beyond reckoning, and a laugh, untrammelled as a child's, broke free.

## Still London

Dewey Dabbar

Cyana picked a path along the treed fringe of London's great river, an adjustable wrench clutched in each hand. Where the noon sun penetrated the dereliction of the southern bank, she paused to watch speckled wood butterflies dance beneath the verdant canopy and bee-flies draw nectar from pavement-fissure primroses.

It had been a typical Tuesday morning for this lithe and smooth-scalped fifty-one-year-old. She had spent an hour or so watching the water—transfixed, as she always was, by the sight of dolphins and other creatures of the tidal flow—and about the same amount of time listening to the once-weekly literary talk on the ground floor of the Shard.

The Shard was a skyscraper that showed no major damage from a century-and-a-half of storms and that had never been hit by a missile. Instead, time had simply rendered it farcical. Popular opinion perceived the structure as a one-thousand-foot emblem of profligacy. Cyana herself pictured a middle finger, raised to what, at the time of construction, was thought of as the future. As a venue—one selected by an organizer with decidedly offbeat tastes—it was a particularly poor match for the Victorian texts on which the latest oration had focused.

The gist of the session, as Cyana recalled it, was that present-day London was nothing like the garden tapestry of Morris's utopia or the miasmal marshland envisioned by Jefferies, nor anything on the spectrum between them. "For what British-born Victorian," the speaker had posed rhetorically, "saw such a blossoming of biophilia in humanity's stars? (Save Muir, perhaps.)"

Cyana felt that she had not gained much from the talk, intellectually. However, courtesy of a friend in attendance who was an unfailingly generous lender, she had at least picked up the tools that would assist her afternoon's work. Cyana had seen people before her struggle with the kind of task that she had been assigned, and she took comfort in being prepared.

The Mayor herself was expected to be there.

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Shortly before 2pm by the nearest sundial, Cyana reached her destination—a place that had been known over the centuries as Battersea Common Fields, Battersea Park, Wandsworth Nut Grove, and, most recently, the London Wild Boar Reserve. She had played a vital role in establishing a broad no-hunting zone throughout the returning matrix of woodland south of the river. It was for this that she had been honoured with the invitation from the Mayoral cabinet.

London was changing rapidly: Each new map was marked not just by a retraction of infrastructure but also by fewer places bearing the labels of implicit custodianship and control. What Cyana had been granted was the ceremonial responsibility for a *denaming*.

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As Cyana worked the final bolt loose, grateful for the two mechanical aids, she turned her gaze away from the moribund sign for the reserve, beyond the hundred-strong crowd behind her, and towards the river. She sensed that in a few decades' time, when the embankment at last gave way, nature's resurgence would only become stronger.

### About the authors

**Nomi McLeod** is a writer and artist living in Devon, England. Both her visual and written work often engages with stories of the land, particularly those from folklore.

**Leath Tonino** is a freelance writer and the author of two essay collections about the outdoors, both published by Trinity University Press: *The Animal One Thousand Miles Long* and *The West Will Swallow You*.

Biographical details for **Taylor** and **Joe (Dewey)**, who co-edited this short themed collection, can be found at the start of the section.