

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE



Poems for  
Our Planet

# Plant Life



National  
Academy  
for Social  
Prescribing

*Art by Post: Poems for Our Planet* is delivered in partnership  
with the National Academy for Social Prescribing





**Poems for  
Our Planet**

**Welcome to Art by Post: Poems for Our Planet. This is an opportunity to use creativity and nature to inspire you and support your wellbeing. Together, we'll take part in creative activities which invite us to connect with the living world around us, and explore opportunities to care better for our planet.**

Getting closer to nature can help us to be happier and feel that our lives are more worthwhile, therefore improving our wellbeing. *The Nature Connection Handbook*, published by the University of Derby, identifies five pathways that can help us grow our connection to nature – we'll highlight some of these throughout this booklet.



### **About the artist**

Anna Selby is a writer and researcher, with a focus on empathy and ecology. Her most recent publication *Field Notes* (written on and under the Atlantic Ocean with waterproof notebooks) was a bestseller with The LRB Bookshop. She is a lecturer at Schumacher College, co-founder of Hazel Press and a poet. Her poetic, in-situ studies of species aim to share a sense of compassion and attentiveness to the environment.



The activities in this booklet celebrate our connection to the 8.7 million species on the planet, including our own. In her book *Owl Sense*, journalist and author Miriam Darlington writes, 'We need the emotional identification with the wild. And the wild needs us to feel that compassion. We will not fight to preserve what we do not love. And to keep our love alive we need contact.'



**'The land knows you, even when you are lost.'**

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*

# 1

## Window study

A window study is a technique used by ecologists, and can also be used to make and shape poems. Write a poem on what you can see through a window. Use the window frame as the limits of your poem. What do you notice moving or growing? What comes in and out of view? What sounds reach you?

You can write your poem in one sitting, or return to the view and soundscape and make separate verses for different times of day, to help grow your poem. You can even do one verse per week, as the natural world rests and blooms. Feel free to also put yourself in this poem and write it almost as a self-portrait at the window: what is above you, next to you, in front of you, etc.

The poem does not have to rhyme or have a set structure. You might like to draw instead of writing, or write a poem within a drawing or collage – any style is welcome!



# 2

## Outside in/inside out

We are nature, and our bodies are our first environment. Even if you are sat in a room by yourself, there are at least 10,001 species in that room: you (a member of *homo sapiens*) and 10,000 other species which live in and on the body. As Walt Whitman wrote: 'I contain multitudes.'

Write about your body as a habitat or landscape. Are your knees hills, your knuckles a mountain range, your palms river lines? Many words we use to describe a landscape we also use for the body – for example, the brow of a hill and our own brow; a furrowed field or forehead; and the shape at the base of our fingernails that is called a 'lunula' – little moon. Choose or make up any words you like and write until you surprise yourself.





# 3

## Wondering

Choose a plant to hang out with, either inside or outside, and describe it from root to tip (if you don't have a plant, you could choose a piece of fruit or a vegetable). Whether you start at the bottom or top of the plant, fruit or vegetable, let that be the beginning of the poem.

Describe it as if no one had ever seen it before, including you, and bring that same sense of awe and wonder. Decide what you feel it would like to be called and make that the title of your poem.



### Queen Elizabeth Hall Roof Garden

Nestled on top of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Roof Garden is home to over 250 species of plants, fruit trees, vegetables, herbs and wildflowers, creating a peaceful haven in the centre of one of the busiest cities in the world.

One of London's best-kept secrets, the garden, originally a partnership with the Eden Project, was built and continues to be maintained by our head gardener, Paul Pulford, founder of Grounded Ecotherapy.

Grounded Ecotherapy are an award-winning team of passionate conservationists as well as a pioneering recovery programme. Through this project, Pulford supports a team of incredible volunteers – who, like himself, may have experienced problems with substance dependency, their mental health and/or homelessness – and provides therapy through horticulture.

We host free events and tours of the garden and are open to referrals to volunteer in the garden throughout the year. You could also check your local community garden, where you might be able to volunteer.



## How the bees and worms rule the world

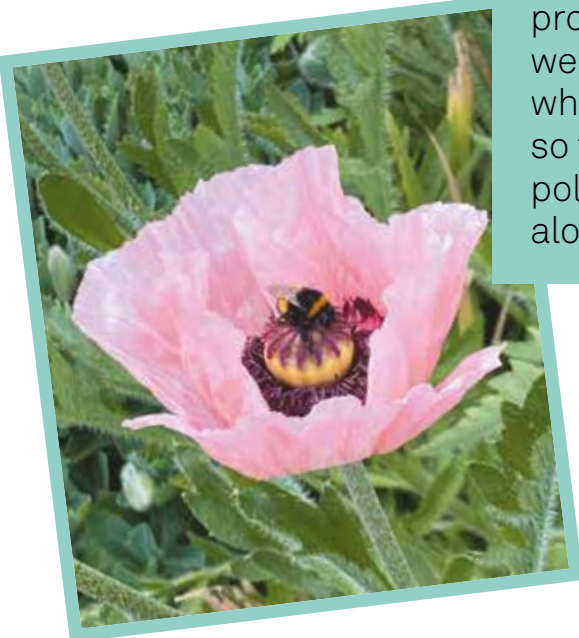
'We need the worms to eat all the rotting vegetation and turn it into the soil; we need bees to pollinate all our plants. Soil comes from all of the decaying trees and dying leaves, the worms come up from the ground and pull the decaying leaves down. Fungi and mushrooms do the same, and then they are eaten by the worms, who produce a fantastic fertiliser of nutrients that have come from the plant material, the rotting wood – so vegetation becomes soil.'

Without the worms, there would be nothing to take all the rotting vegetation into the ground. Worms create little tunnels that are passages so air can get to the roots of the plants. The rainwater can seep into the worm tunnels and get carried to the roots of the plant. The roots of fungi are also eating the roots of the plants. That whole process eventually creates soil.'



**'The first music that humans listened to was birds singing. When I can hear the birds singing, I'm happy. If I can't hear them, I'm not happy.'**

Paul Pulford



'80% of food that we eat is plants that have been pollinated by bees. For us to get carrots, cabbages, radishes, apples, plums, pears and raspberries, the flowers have to be pollinated by bees, and then the plant produces seeds.'

'If the bees go, we wouldn't be able to produce flowers, which then produce seeds we need to put into the ground. Crops like wheat, barley and corn are wind-pollinated, so they don't need bees or insects to pollinate them. But we can't live on them alone.'

**'As far as I'm concerned, bees and the worms rule the planet!'**

Paul Pulford



# 4

## A letter of gratitude to something in nature that sparks joy...

Write a letter to thank the elements in nature for looking after us and the world we live in.

Is there anyone or anything in your life that does something really important but sometimes gets overlooked?

Try writing them a letter of gratitude, thanking them for the things they do. It could be a bee, a worm, a pet, a friend or a house plant that makes you smile, and your letter might make them smile.



### Bird flock names - when birds forage or travel collectively

Do you know the names of any other birds' gatherings?

- A charm of goldfinches
- A murder of crows
- A parliament of rooks
- A gaggle of geese
- A mischief of magpies



### Poem by Anna Selby

#### 'Song for Two'

Two birds discuss what it is to be birds:  
how heaviness would feel if it were possible  
what light it is that grows over them.  
Boomerang moons,  
their wings whisper to the dark -  
now a nick, now a cut, now a curve.

They carve through the night  
with white threads in their beaks.  
Little whittlers. Sky calligraphers.  
Air chasers, who screech into the morning.  
Their lives are a complete act of faith:  
that someone will hear  
and someone will answer  
a note will open a note.

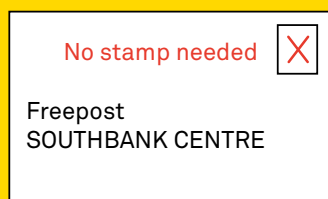
Getting closer to nature can help us to be happier and feel that our lives are more worthwhile, therefore improving our wellbeing. Simply noticing the good things in nature each week brings sustained and clinically significant improvements in mental health. There is now a solid body of evidence that having a strong sense of connection to nature helps people feel good and function well.

To find out more, see the *Nature Connection Handbook*  
<http://bit.ly/NatureConnectionHandbook>

## We'd love to hear from you!

The Southbank Centre is the UK's largest arts centre, and this summer we're presenting a season of events, performances and an exhibition about our planet and climate change. We'll be including some *Poems for Our Planet* poetry sent to us by our participants as part of this.

If you would like to send us poetry and artwork you've created through the activities in this booklet, you can email [artbypost@southbankcentre.co.uk](mailto:artbypost@southbankcentre.co.uk), use the envelope provided or address an envelope to **Freepost SOUTHBANK CENTRE**. Please write your name on the back.



If you can't send us your work by post or email, please arrange for somebody else to send your work to us, or you can tell us about your artwork by phone on **020 7960 4206**.

You're welcome to get in touch to let us know what you think of this booklet, ask questions, give feedback or opt out of the project at any time.

## Contact us

By phone: **020 7960 4206**

By email: [artbypost@southbankcentre.co.uk](mailto:artbypost@southbankcentre.co.uk)

By post: **Freepost SOUTHBANK CENTRE**

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