



# Connections while Solituding

Kay Syrad and Clare Whistler

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## AN ECO-POETRY CORRESPONDENCE COURSE KIN'D & KIN'D

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We call ourselves *kin'd & kin'd*, a composite eco-poet. The name describes connection with other beings, human and non-human, in an attitude (at least, an aspiration of) kindness. In an unpredictable process of frictioning and agreeing, researching, gathering natural objects and materials, reading poems aloud to each other, writing, re-writing and editing, we create site-specific collaborative poems which we call 'exposures'. In a similar fashion, we also design and run a series of eco-poetry workshops and courses under titles such as *Changing Everything Carefully* - a phrase taken from e.e. cummings' poem 'Spring is like a perhaps hand' - and *Field Fairing* - both titles alluding to what we aim for in our efforts to bring together poetry and environmental activism - eco-poetry.

### Eco-poetry

There are many definitions of eco-poetry, but we think of it as a poetry that aspires to be conscious of what we are doing when we describe, record, interact with or take from what we call nature. It is a poetry that recognizes the natural world as source, not resource, and to that end experiments both with language itself and the act of writing in ways that might help us to re-imagine our relationship with the non-human. We trust it is also grounded in respectful connections between people and peoples, aware of the extractivist roots of climate change, environmental degradation and species extinction. This is also the definition we have in a book we have created from one of our poetry courses, *Connections while Solituding*, which we ran during the first Covid lockdown. The book is called *Wild Correspondings: an eco-poetry source book*.

## Connections while Solituding

In 2019 we were running a weekly course at the rewilded estate, Knepp Wildland near Horsham, which since 2003 had been experimenting with ways of restoring its depleted arable farmland by means that included bringing in herds of Longhorn cattle, roe and fallow deer, Tamworth pigs and Exmoor ponies with their different grazing and rooting behaviours. The estate now attracts pairs of almost-lost turtle doves and nightingales, emperor butterflies, storks, and an abundance of pollinating insects and aquatic species. We had planned to run another course there in 2020 but suddenly it was Lockdown and our course was cancelled. We then had two ideas: that we correspond with our eco-poets by post; and that we bring Knepp Wildland to them through the book *Wilding* - a comprehensive account of Knepp's evolution written by its co-owner, Isabella Tree. The poet-correspondents could, we thought, make a deeper connection with Knepp by finding their own urban or rural edge-land, verge, garden, or piece of sky to explore, tend, surrender to, for the duration of the Course - in the full new lonely silence created by the Lockdown.

## Methodology / Pedagogy

In consciousness of our human-induced eco-crisis, working creatively to 'change everything carefully' is our method. It is an attempt to be-with any living thing - human and non-human (grass, birds, soil, all the elements) - in a state of appreciation and thoughtfulness, with time to listen, to allow feeling; to care and to try to hope. With these ambitions, we began to devise the *Connections while Solituding* correspondence course, imagining our poets opening large envelopes to unknown treasures, to exciting ways of investigating and re-casting the other-than-human world, using elements of ritual, performance, embodiment and touch, with writing exercises to encourage a tentacular approach, one that is five-sensical, to connect body to object, and juxtaposing wilder ways of writing (what we call 'poemish') with traditional poetic forms. We imagined writing Emily Dickinson's poems on the envelopes, enclosing sprigs of blackthorn, wildflower seeds, sending Ladies' Smock from the spring verges veiled between layers of tracing paper.

In mid-April, then, we began sending out, at fortnightly intervals over twelve weeks, our care-full hope to more than twenty correspondents: some were already well-established eco-poets, some were emerging poets, others were visual artists/musicians/teachers. Over the weeks, we sent them hand-written letters and printed guides - ideas, poems, writing prompts, glass drops and a Glacier mint through which to look at the world, a few meal worms to eat or admire, 'transformation' matchboxes containing drawings of a leatherjacket and a crane-fly... We set writing exercises that asked Correspondents to use or adapt traditional or hybrid poetic forms: for example, during *Connections* we invited Correspondents to write a madrigal, a soliloquy, a growing earth-form, an 'exquisite exo-sonnet' and a nest poem in terza rima. But we also encouraged them to invent words, use verbs

instead of nouns, create verbings from bodily experiences such as reaching or burrowing; to allow words to run together, to ignore or exploit rules of grammar, syntax and punctuation, to allow language to break down into sounds and utterances.

What we were doing was creating a specifically eco-poetic context for new writing, leading one of our correspondents to say that *Connections while Solituding* turned out to be not so much a course as an artwork, a process; not a curriculum but in William Pinar's invocation of the Latin - *currere* - something running, flowing - a poetic conversation, a weaving of political concerns with doing, with the intuitive, the visceral.

We asked that correspondents write back to us with their letters and poems within two weeks of receiving each package, and when we opened their envelopes of reply, we were astonished and moved: their letters and poems were also handwritten, they sent artworks and gifts; they tackled the often strange and challenging exercises with huge imagination and commitment. In fact, we found the works to be so rich and heart-felt that we realised we needed a lot of time and quietude to properly honour them, because it seemed that these human words were themselves a kind of caress of the earth. How could we properly respond? In the presence of each other (either online or socially-distanced) we opened each letter ritualistically, with a dodo-embossed letter-knife, and read all the letters and poems aloud to each other before replacing them in their envelopes and arranging them alphabetically by author in a box, each set tied with ribbon. We have been so moved, surprised and overwhelmed by what we have been given - and it seemed that our original invitations, the poets' responses and our meditative responses to their work had now become a kin'dling and entangling, fully in the spirit of *Changing Every Thing Care Fully*.

## What the storks taught

(A poem to celebrate, in May 2020, the first recorded breeding of white storks in the UK for 600 years)

unseeing is not unbeing  
& earth will sing its birds  
into the quietest ceilings

it will nest in the heart of our suburbs  
in the hole we dug six centuries deep  
too arid, too umbrous for birth

under its tender oilslick wing-beats  
it'll raise a rowdy trinity of eggs  
four ounces each of mottled luminosity

and just at the moment we suspect  
there's nothing more to be heard  
something gives, little ones fledge

& the air is full of words

Karen Smith

## Wild Correspondings: an eco-poetry sourcebook

*Wild Correspondings* is a source book and a work book – it can be used in a teaching or group context or by individuals. Anyone picking it up could follow the letters, guidelines, reading prompts and writing exercises in the order set out there, or in any order, and can explore how poets responded to the exercises. The Correspondents who took part included several award-winning poets including Jemma Borg, who won the inaugural Ginkgo eco-poetry prize, and Caleb Parkin who is Bristol's City Poet 2020-22; but there are also many remarkable and moving poems in the book written by people who hadn't written much poetry before, and this has been particularly gratifying to us as course leaders. This cross-collaborative work needs to be shared: we and the Correspondents are currently arranging events based on *Wild Correspondings* at universities (including PGCE departments), at bookshops, galleries and other venues.

*Wild Correspondings: an eco-poetry source book* is published by Elephant Press (2021), available here: <https://www.elephantpress.co.uk/>



Since 2018 **kin'd & kin'd** have run eco-poetry courses and workshops and have been writing poetry collaboratively. Their work has been published in **Magma**, **Finished Creatures** and **Coast to Coast to Coast**; they also have a small book, **h/edge** (Elephant Press 2020), and a creative interview with kin'd & kin'd by Alice Willitts is published as *Think Thing* (Elephant Press, 2021).

**Kay Syrad** is a poet, novelist and former Poetry Editor of the longstanding journal, *Envoi*. Her third poetry collection, *What is near* was published in September. <https://kaysyrad.co.uk/>



**Clare Whistler** is a collaborative artist in movement, text and performance. She is co-founder of the award-winning annual [WaterWeek](http://www.clarewhistler.co.uk/) exhibition. <http://www.clarewhistler.co.uk/>