

Making Murmuration

By Linda France

During the time I'm curating *Murmuration*, I listen to Helen Macdonald reading her stunning new collection of essays, *Vesper Flights* (Jonathan Cape, 2020). I stop breathing when I hear her description of 'hosts of European starlings that assemble in the sky before they roost' and feel them fill the wide space of my imagination:

We call them murmurations, but the Danish term, 'sort sol', is better: black sun. It captures their almost celestial strangeness. Standing on the Suffolk coast a few years ago, I saw a far-flung mist of starlings turn in a split second into an ominous sphere like a dark planet hanging over the marshes. Everyone around me gasped audibly before it exploded in a maelstrom of wings.

It is the job of 'the best words in the best order' to summon their subjects and the feelings they elicit, to transform the imagination of the reader. That's what I hoped to do with this *Murmuration*, inspired by the flocks of starlings ornamenting the sky every autumn like avian fireworks. I wanted to borrow their natural capacity for shared purpose, communication and movement to embody what human beings might be capable of if they worked together to address the biggest ever challenge facing the planet and all its species and systems – the perfect storm of the Climate Emergency, Mass Extinction and an unprecedented global pandemic.

Plans were seeded at the beginning of my residency as Climate Writer with New Writing North and Newcastle University. I envisaged lots of rich conversations resulting in a fluttering paper sculpture constructed from everyone's 'bird verses' flying together in the cavernous roof space of Durham Town Hall during Durham Book Festival. Then coronavirus struck and changed all our lives so the project had to be re-imagined to make it work online. The sculpture metamorphosed into the possibility of an animated film-poem, created by artist Kate Sweeney.

Working together on the trailer, inviting people to send in lines celebrating the natural world, helped set the terms of the final film-poem. We wanted the human touch to be visible. As an inextricable part of nature, human creativity and collectivity also deserves to be celebrated. Anticipating the need for a poetic form to hold the lines together, I'd asked that people's submitted phrases or verses should begin with either 'What if...' or 'Because I love...'. I hoped that this would establish some unity of intention and give the poem some natural coherence even before I started editing. Of the many 'poetry in public spaces' projects I've worked on over the years, the most successful were those with the clearest and most imaginative briefs.

Kate's birds worked their magic and we received exactly 500 superb verses – between 1 and 3 lines of varying lengths. I chose to work with them unattributed, focussing on the lines themselves – the words, feelings and ideas. My house and my head were full of images, postcards from the natural world. The two documents ran to 11,296 words.

I read them again and again and, to make the process manageable, I decided to work with the 'Because I love...' and 'What if ...' verses separately and see where they took me. I made a list of the themes suggested by each document. Despite the far-flung spread of language and style, the same ideas kept recurring – seasons, times of day and types of weather, birds and creatures, trees and flowers. There was lots of sea and sky, food and colours, the five senses. In my notebook I've written 'embodied, visceral, elemental'. There was a sense of great intimacy and presence and I felt very moved by these sincere expressions of pleasure in and connection to the natural world, and the strong longing for positive change, particularly at a time when everything was on hold and we'd just witnessed the loveliest of springs and early summers. There was a real attitude of review and an interrogation of our relationship with the planet and other species – acknowledging the mistakes of our past and hopes and fears for the future.

I knew I wanted to catch the noise of it all, let the clash and clamour co-exist and recreate something of the starling murmuration's fractal patterning both on the page and in the ear. This would be a way, I hoped, of including all the different voices, all the 'I's and the 'we's of the different verses.

Working with each section in turn, I distilled the lines into a selection that exemplified all the themes. There were lots of overlaps and I wanted them all to be represented, in spirit, if not verbatim. Including every single line as it stood would have made for a very long film and stretched the definition of a poem beyond its limits, as well as most listeners' forbearance. If, in poetry, less is more, this is also a good principle to apply to our lives more broadly at a time of ecological re-visioning.

Beginning with the 'Because I love...' lines, I let the starlings (of which there were a great number) take charge of the poem's overture. In this section, I was struck by what was an almost ecstatic singing of the world in many of the lines, praises flying to the earth's four corners, full of heart-stopping detail and immense love.

With both sections, I worked in a way not dissimilar to how I might if writing a long poem of my own – starting with lots of random notes and research material, then refining them draft by draft until I hit upon a shape and pattern I'm happy with, sculpting and adjusting, reading each new section out loud. It took over 5 hours' immersion to establish the momentum of what became the poem's opening-section-in-progress.

The initial Word documents were a hotch-potch of different formats and line lengths and, to stay true to that, I created a layout of indents and irregular patterning of not-quite-stanzas, more syntactical gestures, separated by the white space of sky and silence. I hope this might be heard, as well as seen on the page.

People might recognise complete lines or maybe just wisps of words or phrases, re-ordered, upended. Some verses went in wholesale – full of conviction and ‘right’ for the poem that was asking to be made at this time to honour all the memories, fears and wishes people sent in. Every single verse mattered in the conception and construction of the final piece, even if it only resonates in a single word or in the eloquent silence between the lines.

Moving onto the ‘What if...’ lines, I felt overwhelmed by the sheer shape-shifting variety and scale of what I knew would be the final part. It was like being in a meadow at high summer, packed with so many wild-flower species, all mixed up together, but still one landscape, a single whole. I had to get down on my knees and inspect each individual flower (word/phrase/line), while also remembering the context, the ecology of the meadow (the poem’s overall context/aesthetic). I needed to adjust my depth of field constantly to manage images and sense, improvise order, cut and paste, trusting an alchemy beyond my own capacity.

I was glad for the poem to take me by surprise, for it to breathe a life of its own. That’s definitely what happened with the middle section – which ended up being a space for all the tricky ‘what ifs’ people imagined, a dystopic version of the future, marked by loss, absence: a powerful counterpoint to the intense presence and embodiment in the sections on either side. The triptych form suggested stability, as well as openness and creative potential, pivoting round that eery melancholic limbo, a vision of a world bereft of biodiversity, so perfectly evoked by Kate’s use of footage of the San Francisco sky burnt orange by wildfires still raging as I write this.

The final section enacts a transformation of that bleak emptiness, tracing cycles that ultimately lead back to the birds, carrying a secular prayer for change for the better, balance and safety. Kate contributed her own distinctive bricolage of collaged drawing, animation and video – all taking place within ‘the artist’s notebook’, making manifest the agency of our imaginations and our own hands, alone and together. I love the tactile quality of Kate’s work – the sensual materiality of the feathers and the truth and passion conveyed in the marks that appear on the page, bird and word, ink and pencil, ever-shifting, ever-renewing.

I missed working face to face in so many ways, but felt particularly isolated having to be my own audio producer. The best place to record turned out to be in a corner of my bedroom where the sound of the almost constant wind here didn’t seem to reach. I had to balance my laptop on a pile of books to make it the right height for me to stand and speak the poem, section by section, over and over to get it right, with

some judicious cutting and pasting. I missed Chris Watson's ears and his trusted technical skills. He kindly lent us some of his startling recordings so he's there in spirit in this most symbolically collaborative of ventures. Kate also lit upon the beautifully atmospheric music created by Lindsay Duncanson from notations of birdsong.

There was much labour – Kate's painstaking work, exchanges of images and clips, emails and phone calls, adjustments to the text – before we reached something we were all completely happy with. Working on it took my thinking about Climate in new directions, deepening my understanding of the dangers of 'us'-and-'them'-ing, the divisiveness and polarisation that the news seems to lead with every day.

Transforming our relationship with the natural world into something more reciprocal has little to do with righteousness or separation. The collective includes all beings and asks for mutual tolerance, transparency and trust. This positive ideal and deep appreciation for nature is carried in the lines that people sent in. There is great hope here, as well as grief.

The novelist Elena Ferrante once wrote: 'I am a crowd of others.' I hear the voice of *Murmuration* as a 'crowd of others': different people's words and phrases jostling against each other, touching and connecting in a way we ourselves can't at the moment, kept at a distance that doesn't feel quite human. Another thought from Helen Macdonald also struck a chord; watching birds flocking in Hungary, she is very aware of nearby border defences keeping out refugees who have walked all the way from Syria:

In the face of fear, we are all starlings, a group, a flock, made of a million souls seeking safety. I love the flock not simply for its biological exuberance, but for the way it has prompted me to pick similarity out of strangeness, for the way its chaos was transformed, on reflection, to individuals and small family groups wanting the simplest things: freedom from fear, food, a place to safely sleep.

I am proud of the poem we all made together and I hope everyone who participated can feel proud too. I loved using language and images and syntax I would never have dreamed of if I'd been working on my own. Bold and dynamic, the word and image hoard was 500 times bigger. My imagination has been enlarged by it and I hope yours will be too. Our *Murmuration*, so skilfully and movingly illuminated by Kate Sweeney, is a many-winged example of how much we can achieve together, the power of a shared focus and collective action. We have made something that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is inspiring. Please enjoy the film-poem and the poem 'on the page' and share them with friends and family. *Murmuration* can play its own small part in galvanising us to take the leap from thought to word to deed and make our own pledges to creatively transform the losses and dangers our planet and its creatures are currently facing.

© *Linda France October 2020*