Eco Sonnet Chain

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FOREWORD

Climate Change – global heating, ecological collapse, mass extinction, extractive capitalism, environmental injustice, the great unravelling etc – does not, like time itself, unfold in a single, straight line. Serendipitously, though, we are publishing this pamphlet in time for COP30 in Belém, Brazil. Having been at COP26 in Glasgow four years ago, I know it's easy to be cynical about what these Conferences of the Parties actually achieve – even the slippery name fails to inspire confidence.

However, despite riding a fresh wave of climate change denial (it's all a 'green scam' according to Trump), this one might be different. Already being called the Amazonia COP, it's underpinned by the indigenous ethic of *mutirão* – the immense possibility of collective action from the ground up, based on the understanding that everything is connected to everything else.

Our Eco Sonnet Chain embodies a similar collaborative endeavour: fourteen diverse voices in urgent conversation about the current state of things on our home planet. Every poet, building their response on the preceding poet's last line, brought a deep listening and a capacity to surprise as varied as their play with form and language. And so, with more birds than you might expect flickering in and out of the verses, a sense of mutual concern and intense questioning emerged.

From Valentine's Day to Lammas, a new poem arrived in my inbox once a fortnight – a small, handmade gift, full of love, grief, or rage. I watched our chain grow with something like wonder – what had we

unleashed? A roar, testimony, or indictment, a spell, howl, or prayer? I'll leave it to you to decide, while keeping an eye on the weather and all those other awkward, life-threatening things our politicians and corporations prefer us to ignore.

The Eco Sonnet Chain is one small way to keep the conversation, and us, alive. Many thanks to all the poets for writing (and to Bill Herbert and Andy Jackson for making it happen, to J.O. Morgan for typesetting & design, to Sophie Herxheimer for our cover) and to you for reading.

LINDA FRANCE
October 2025

Eco Sonnet Chain

LINDA FRANCE

'Whatever you do, do not try to save the world but consider the possibility that the world is here to save you'
Báyò Akómoláfé

next door's dogs are barking at the wind.
the wind barks back. on days like these it's wise
to stay indoors, though even there the sky
keeps falling on your head, not minded
now with gravity. the year began snowed
in / burned down / blown away – news cycle
and nature cycle vying for more eyes
or clicks – earth as horror show: THE LOST WORLD

every frame rolling out in your absence,
so loud it drowns the birdsong, a coal tit,
your bones of carbon, the life you forget,
for so long wrong about success, presence.

what if you said *stop*. here is where you live.
begin again. how much there is to love.

Begin again. How much there is to love.
This nest, for instance: green as pistachio,
swept to the pavement's edge with the lime leaves.
Make space in your life and things appear.
I pick it up. I cradle it:
as warm and soft and feathery to hold
as the body of a bird. I bring it home –
I must describe how it is made.

First, sphagnum, all around the rim, swirling.
Next, ghost leaves and an ash-seed casing.
The crucible is fashioned out of grass.
Faded yellow drupes poke out on stalks,
like berries on a wreath.
The thing is beginning to unravel.

The thing is beginning to unravel
and has come unmoored from its base.
Pilfered components a tatty tangle
of leathery appendage, exoskeletal casing.
First thing, you log the changes overnight:
the way the trunk imperceptibly roves
across the room, inching and sluglike;
how some of its hundred eyes have closed
whilst lower down, a talon prises apart.
How somewhere at its core, a pinkish bio-
luminescence has ignited, in the hidden heart
of its meshed-in workings. You do not know
its provenance. You did not place it there.
A rearing at its centre, tall as a famished bear.

A rearing at its centre, tall as a famished bear,
for decades forced to dance on burning ground,
in iron shoes, fed sugar cubes, made to wear a shape
that human hands have pressed and bound.
But still she rises. This began before,
and will not stop – will bend the barred cage,
will crack the dams, will shake the ocean floor.
What aching waits for us, we wildly constant stars.
I dream this waking suddenly, thick with dust,
a certainty: where now the house has grown,
a tree once stood, its roots my feet,
its trunk my trunk, its branches our shared crown.
The earth still breathes, if coughing flames.
She knows herself, although we've ceased to sing her name.

She knows herself, although we've ceased to sing her name,
and it, unspoken, becomes an oubliette –
she falls from memory, this cloud forest jewel,
her species erased from the book of the world.
The ghost of her voice threads the mist – her threnody
stitched to the mountain's shroud. Somewhere, a lover –
a fleck of flame, a gilded spelk in a leaf's
green flesh? She remembers the moon, reflected
in ephemeral pools, her pearled eggs, their spheres
pricked with tiny stars of life. She calls and waits –
the elfin trees return no match for the sound.
Somewhere, another? Her name is Loneliness,
is Grief. Her kindled skin grows dim – her small light
fallen to the ground. Weep, for the darkness has come.

Fall to the ground. Weep, for the darkness has come.
Sister, you and I walk the Rio Grande Rift, down-dropped
vaults of red-brown rocks, turquoise river and its hum.
Up, quick. Remember the flame tree house, treat shop
across the street, orange planets for flowers, marble doorstop.
Childhood's tectonic shifts. A volcano erupts and a meadow
of sea grass floats between us. Thirty million years of outcrop,
basalt sun-dragon, land stretched thin as a memory. Slow
evolution of river, of sister. *Just look at that sky, the glow
of burnished willows*, we keep saying, again and again.
Feet treading dust. All this earth slip, wild fire, flow
not fully formed, but forming. Deep-seated rifting again
and again. Remember the hours in our caravanserai, glister
of time sifting through our fingers, thrum of light sublime.

Time sifting through our fingers, a thrum of light: sublime
elegies of the blackthorn profuse with blossoms
on bare, dark stems – April's snow! So the humble shine.
And the willows are dawning – some come first with lanterns,
with bright cobs: filaments pollen-tipped with yellow
like phosphorus lit at the end of a match. And now the willows
come with song, their shifting song of shifting leaves
curled to the notes of light. New leaves at their threshold
pause – go through, go through the door? The bud?
And yet? And now? they ask. Yes, so the old may fall.
The barest stories grow to incandescence – and soften
stone, as water does. Stick a thread of willow into mud,
and it will tree. I think now of joy, not weeping.
Travel green, human heart – thou, who rustle like a willow.

Travel green, human heart – thou, who rustle like a willow.
Yes heart, bring on the rain to save our spring.
The flowers bow their heads in sorrow
at the naked sun, a drought is coming.
Human heart, where are you? Will you beat
forever? Can you fix the human weather,
swell the clouds and make the river sweet
again or stem the flood and quench the fire?
Nah. All these questions to the heart as if
it has some agency. It's just a metaphor
for faith among the ruins, a way to live
while knowing what we take, then take some more,
as spring returns to us with stubborn love
that wakes the trees and greens the willow bud.

Love wakes the trees and greens the willow bud
or, as we in the idiom of now
should say, love does its thing with, like, the world
IRL – the stinging, sticky, blow-
stink world. We don't think we should watch it, right?
The nuzzling, though, is hot. The little tongues,
little but long, and the flower doobries tight
for dabbing in and out of. Disgusting.
Let's watch some more. We're into it. Let's binge
the season, sleep and runny eyes and snot
get bent. The screams are here on pickaxe wings
and how much later can the daylight large it?
It's good because we don't know what will happen.
It's bad because we don't know what will happen.

It's bad because we don't know what will happen.
The bush is singing and it shakes with sparrows.
Say a sparrowhawk hurls in and decimates
the flock. Those that live chirp on. Are their shrieks
relief or panic? Our Wandsworth teacher told us
how to tell *the black bib male sparrer*
from *the laidee one* in her once common, now rare
south London chant. Threw the blackboard rubber
at our heads if we were drifting. She'd yell from out
her Clapham grave to hear of sparrers in decline.
Parrakeets! You what? She was a hawk
for discipline. Drummed in all the basics:
times tables, how to gut a rabbit, story time.
It isn't like we haven't been prepared.

It isn't like we haven't been prepared.
We know the story of the ark by heart –
the pitch, the gopherwood, the grateful pairs
of lemurs, elephants. Two aardvarks
burrow through soft wood into wished dark,
the grave-boat stinks of our collective fear.
Outside, water outstrips the watermark.
The tigers line up with the quivering deer

and at the helm, a man who thinks he's spared
stands in each parable and steers the ship.
Below him, panic-coupling. I swear
we aren't a match. And yet. I take your lip
between my teeth. I couldn't hate you more,
you, at the world's end, all I'm reaching for.

You, at the world's end, all I'm reaching for.
Pinguinus impennis, numenius tenuirostris,
emberiza citrinella. A little bit of bread and
NO: tweezering goldfinch hyaline splinters glazed dull eyes of dolls.
Gazella
gazella, panicking along the length of the West Bank Separation Wall,
smashed against the barrier of the central reservation. Diogo
Jota's burned-out Lamborghini.
The leopards of En Gedi, starved
into landfills of disenteric nappies, dis
membered plastic dolls. Remember the pit-yard weasel,
hunting over my breathless boots, there between the rusting tubs
and panzers?
The greenfinch in the midland hawthorn?
The ichneumons of Rafah,
a Species of Least Concern, their bitten-off faces and choked-off
trichonomosis screams.
Garefowl hiding in the attic, wrens stitched into the lining of
my coat.
O pyrrhic goldfinch bleeding face, O holocaust gazella.

O pyrrhic goldfinch bleeding face, O holocaust gazella.
So Gaia calls, as though a ghazaleer,

first to a goldfinch flashing its red-specked cheek
as our hire-car turns the Cretan lane: sleek hedge-hustler,

it sings, *Since all things see similitude, proceed*
through rhyme to just comparison, that seed of thistle: hear

how Narcissus can't discern the οἶκος[1] in his ecocide,
turns family to famine, pistil into pistoleer.

The *kri-kri*[2] next to the abyss picks up this creed:
Let the leaf consider cadence in the fall from mistletoe to missile.

Then, glimpsed on the night-beach after our trek to the Asklep-
ion: half-goats, half-ghosts, a flock fleeing what, more hostile

still than us, who rose to film them as though from physic sleep?
– We've made the Earth our mortar, greed our pestle.

1 οἶκος – *household, home, family, kin*
2 kri-kri – *wild goats, native to Crete*

We've made the Earth our mortar, greed our pestle.
No one made us do that, no one made us
period. Not a bang or whimper – a rustle
and a bewildered unbelieving doofus
played by Cillian Murphy in his scrubs
with his plastic bag he's only missed it all.
And on Westminster Bridge his brimming sobs
reveal the Earth has pretty much fuck-all
to show more fair, ne'er saw he, never felt
a calm so deep, he'd better find his folks,
better play Hide and Seek in the whole world
like Monty Python, has about four weeks,
that's all we got, push through the market square
too late like Gunner Snowden, there there.

despite the thing beginning to unravel, she knows
herself, while we've ceased to sing her name,
fall to the ground, weep that darkness has come,
time sifting through our fingers, a thrum of light.

ravel green, human heart, like a willow:
love wakes the trees, greening the willow bud –
a rearing at its centre, a famished bear.
is it so bad not knowing what will happen,

it isn't as if we haven't been prepared?
at the world's end, you are all we're reaching for,
o pyrrhic goldfinch, o holocaust gazella,

we've made the Earth our mortar, greed our pestle.
too late – it's all we've got – the market square, there,
there to begin again: how much there is to love

assembled by Linda France

Whaleback City Press is a Dundee-based publishing venture from serial collaborators W. N. Herbert and Andy Jackson. Publications are irregular (in some cases highly irregular), focussing mainly on collaborative projects and usually, though not exclusively, on poetry.

Whaleback City Press will round up the best work emerging from a variety of established online projects: New Boots and Pantisocracies, the Dundee Renga Project, the Gude and Godlie Ballatis, and future works-in-progress as yet undefined.