

# Surveilling bodies in crisis, escaping surveillance: *Some of Us Just Fall: On Nature and Not Getting Better* (Polly Atkin 2023)

The 10th Biennial Surveillance Studies Network / Surveillance & Society Conference  
University of Ljubljana  
May 2024

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# Nature writing, identifying an **archeology of ownership**

1. British nature: a surveilled, controlled space
2. Life-writing: writing dual crises
3. Escaping the narrative of the "nature cure" as a surveillance and control experience
4. Reclaiming agency and politics

# A few words of context: British nature writing and surveillance

- « Be subject to no sight but thine and mine, invisible / To every eyeball else. » (*The Tempest*, I. 2. 303-4, Prospero to Ariel)
- Domesticated nature as a "continuum of control » (Estok 2007, 73)



Promotional material for Gregory Doran's production of *The Tempest* with the Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016.

# The James Cropper Wainwright Prize 2023 Winners Announced



Children's Winner



Conservation Winner



Nature Winner

"Running water isn't just a resource or a setting against which human stories take place – it is part of our story – we are part of water's story. We control it, divert it, harness it, but it always has the ability to act back towards or against us. There are of course issues with ascribing agency to water, especially divine agency, but I do find myself thinking that way.' Beer, Amy-Jane. *The Flow: Rivers, Water and Wildness*, 2023, p. 110.

Polly Atkin,  
*Some of Us Just  
Fall: On Nature  
and Not Getting  
Better*, 2023

- The rise of memoirs in nature writing
- Leaving the « nature cure »  
(Richard Mabey, 2005)

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“The problem is the computer systems don’t talk to each other. The problem is **I do not control my data.**” (Atkin 248)

# 1. British nature: a surveilled, controlled space

- The « post-pastoral »: people « at home in the natural world as much as in the social world » (Gifford 1999, 148-9)
- The threat of conservatism as ownership of nature: "authentic rural life, free from encroachment, was the antidote to the modernity that had produced the [First World] War" (Kerridge 2001, 138)

# Bearings: writing the intertext

Grasmere: the land as text

"I love to see Grasmere like this, from in the water, from what Roger Deakin called the frog's-eye view. It is a different kind of knowing." (11)

"The veins of the leaf look like the sections of a sail. It brings a D. H. Lawrence poem into my mind, lines I thought I had forgotten, that I pored over as a student twenty years ago. *Now it is autumn and the falling fruit / and the long journey towards oblivion.*" (13)



## 2. Life-writing: writing dual crises

- Writing the climate crisis as a situated crisis of the body
- Paying attention to nature: outside of the Foucauldian paradigm of surveillance: « In the face of such touching silliness about technofixes (or techno-apocalypses), sometimes it is hard to remember that it remains important to embrace situated technical projects and their people. » Haraway 2016, 3.
- « Making kin », Haraway 2016, 99.
- Of the importance of *Pathosformeln* (Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 217)



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publications/](https://pollyatkin.com/publications/)

### 3. The body in nature: escaping control, escaping the medical narrative

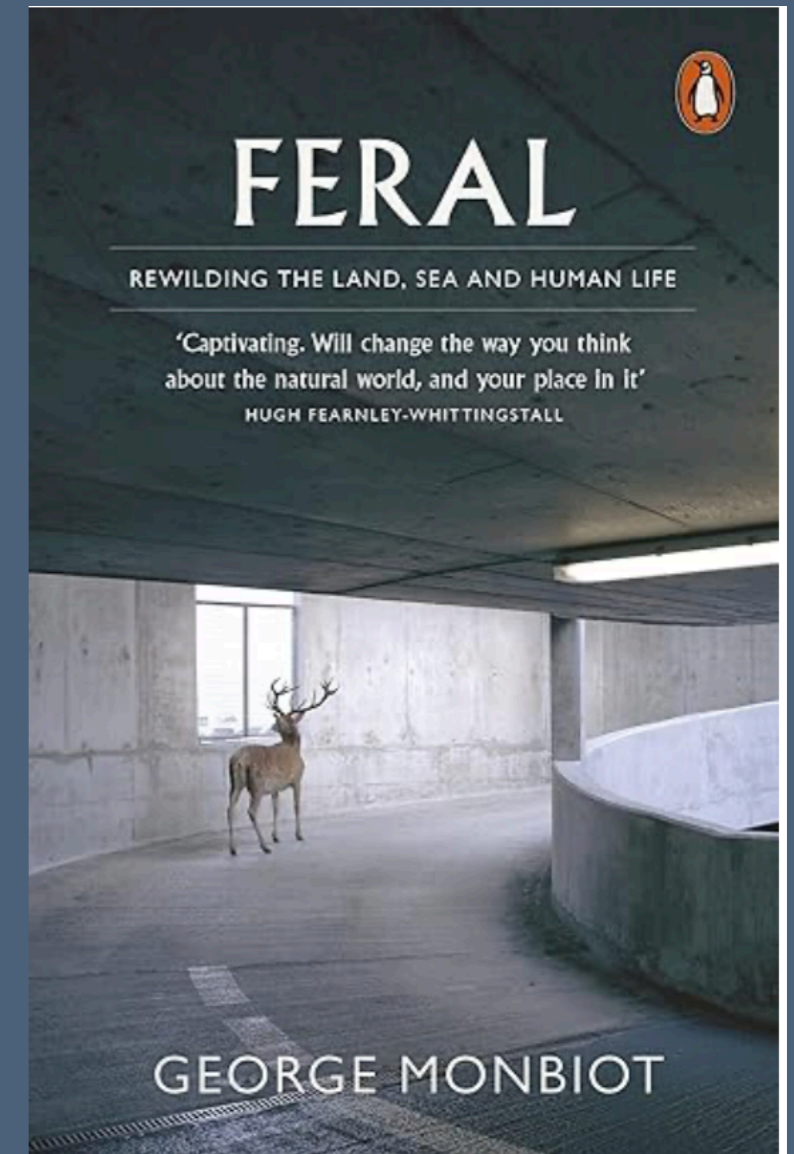
« Grasmere was my medicine. I believed in it. I had faith. I had love. When it began to fail me, I thought I just needed more, more tree, more lake, more mountain. **I couldn't understand why it wasn't working any more, why I was getting sicker and sicker,** despite the mountains, the water, the trees. Even after all those years, all that sickness work experience, I still fell for the oldest line. I still fell for the impossible pill. » (215)



<https://wordsworth.org.uk/>

Cure assumes there was a time when things were unproblematically well to go back to, when the body was benign, polite, did as it was asked with enthusiasm and courtesy. I don't have such a time to return to, not in my body. Say the body is a body of earth – a small planet in which we live like a molten core, or, no – a mycelial network in the soil – what is there to be restored? **The ideology of cure makes a cultivated garden of the body, a smallholding, a landscaped park. It wants the body weeded, the soil enriched, the pests controlled. It wants the high yield of the body.** [...] But the body was never a garden, unless by garden you mean the beginning of everything. [...] You think wildness will save you. You think nature is essentially good and fair. Nature doesn't care about the integrity of your wild body. If it restores you to wildness, it will be through feeding you into the earth. » (215-6, emphasis mine)

"In all the wilderness years of my undiagnosis and misdiagnosis I learnt to see my body this way. Feral body. Recalcitrant body. Wilful, obstinate. An unbroken horse from a lifetime movie. A bad dog who will not be taught. Part wolf. Too wild. I thought if I was good enough I could tame it. I thought I could make it good. Orders mean nothing to it. It has never been anything but its own wild self, a creature of its own.[...] Now I try to live alongside my body."  
(Atkin 287)

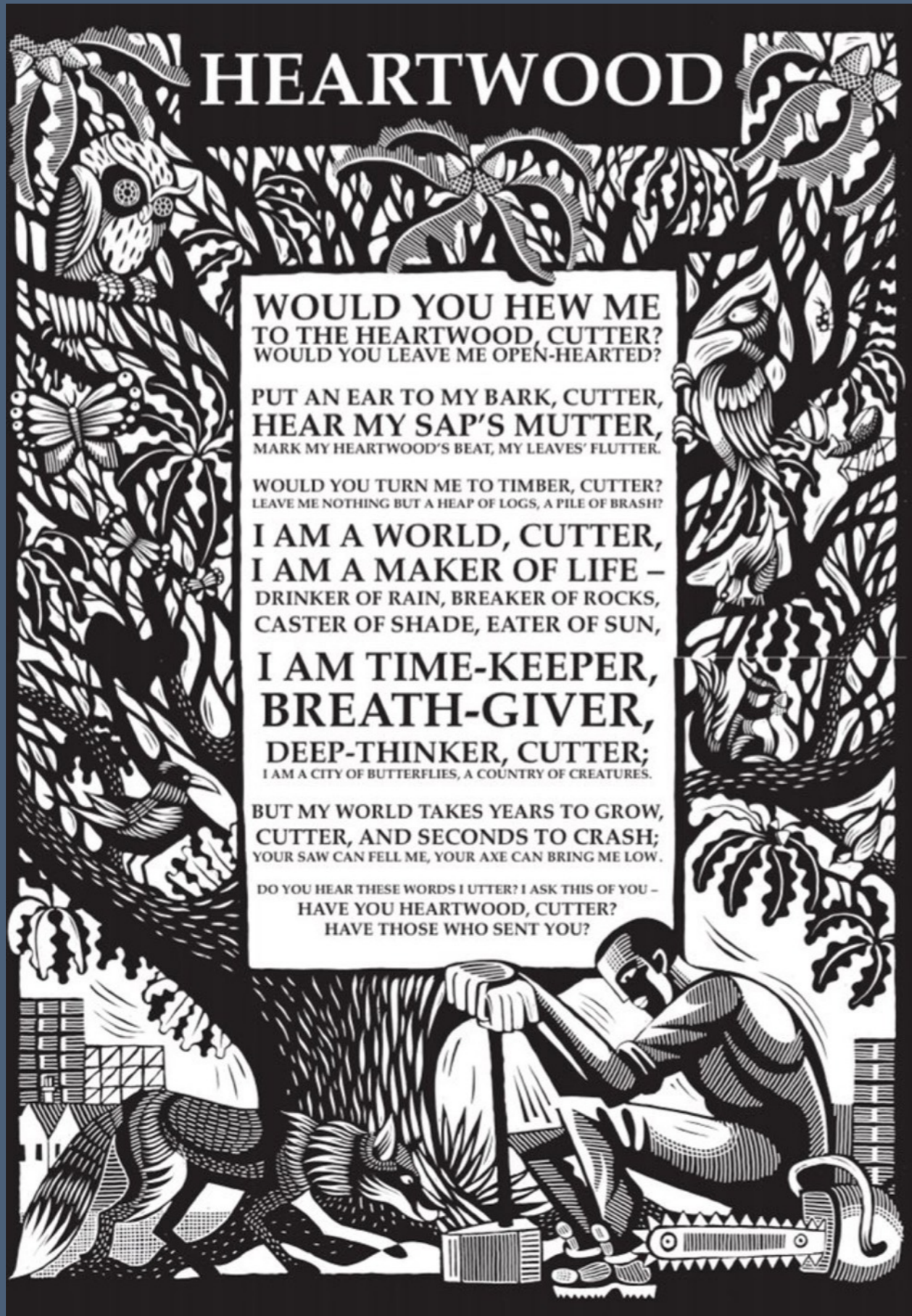


- **The shift:** "I left the room an hour later, diagnosed with Hypermobility Ehlers-Danlos syndrome." (96)
- "My arms, as I already knew, are much longer than they should be. So much so, the doctor measured them twice. The span of your arms should equal your height, or thereabouts. My arm span is 10 cm greater than my height. In my diagnosis letter this becomes 'a markedly elevated span-height ratio'. No wonder I have never been able to find sleeves to cover my wrists." (64)
- "The consultant told me the results didn't warrant further investigation. There was nothing more to find. Some women, he told me, are just very sensitive. (114)
- **"There is the euphoria of knowing what is happening and why; the despondency of not being able to act on your knowledge."** (247).
- "Diligent in my rust, I try to get my bloods checked monthly. My GP will send me a message: iron high: request venesection. It is my job to ring the Day Hospital to book a venesection, but each time there is a new problem. There is no clear instruction to venesect me. There is no instruction to venesect me at particular levels. **They cannot take my word on the tests. They cannot see the tests on their system.**" (248).

## 4. Reclaiming agency and politics

« 'The kingdom of the sick is not a democracy. 'Sinéad Gleeson » & « 'To take up residence in my body again, I write.' Jacqueline Alnes » (Atkin, 6, epigraph)

"It is far easier, of course, to reveal oneself as vulnerable from a position of security. This is as true of matters of the heart as it is with disclosing disability: the more secure our position in society, the less of a risk it is to unveil our tender points. I understood disability largely via the social model – a product of disabling environments which will not adapt to the needs of a body's impairments. **Nevertheless, I thought of vulnerability as something that resided in the individual**" (292, emphasis mine)



# HEARTWOOD

WOULD YOU HEW ME  
TO THE HEARTWOOD, CUTTER?  
WOULD YOU LEAVE ME OPEN-HEARTED?

PUT AN EAR TO MY BARK, CUTTER,  
HEAR MY SAP'S MUTTER,  
MARK MY HEARTWOOD'S BEAT, MY LEAVES' FLUTTER.

WOULD YOU TURN ME TO TIMBER, CUTTER?  
LEAVE ME NOTHING BUT A HEAP OF LOGS, A PILE OF BRASH?

I AM A WORLD, CUTTER,  
I AM A MAKER OF LIFE –  
DRINKER OF RAIN, BREAKER OF ROCKS,  
CASTER OF SHADE, EATER OF SUN,

I AM TIME-KEEPER,  
**BREATH-GIVER,**  
DEEP-THINKER, CUTTER;  
I AM A CITY OF BUTTERFLIES, A COUNTRY OF CREATURES.

BUT MY WORLD TAKES YEARS TO GROW,  
CUTTER, AND SECONDS TO CRASH;  
YOUR SAW CAN FELL ME, YOUR AXE CAN BRING ME LOW.

DO YOU HEAR THESE WORDS I UTTER? I ASK THIS OF YOU –  
HAVE YOU HEARTWOOD, CUTTER?  
HAVE THOSE WHO SENT YOU?

« Heartwood », poem by  
Robert Macfarlane,  
linocut by Nick Hayes,  
2019.

Thank you for your attention!

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