



# **RETURN ADDRESS**

Erin Robinsong & Merlin Sheldrake

*who are you ice who are you storm*

– Alice Notley

*This is the way a communion with the sky and the sea began, the  
necessity to respond to their desires with a work that would be  
prayer, a joy to the elements*

– Cecilia Vicuña

*Hello beautiful, I love how you grow where people don't want  
you to*

– CAConrad

*Do not think you have to say  
Anything back. But you do  
Say something back which I  
Hear by the way I speak to you.*

– W. S. Graham

ADDRESS  
RETURN ADDRESS

ROSE  
BORAGE  
AIR  
SELF-HEAL  
OCEAN  
SOIL  
MOSS  
MOON  
ROCK  
SKY  
RAVEN

APPENDIX



## ADDRESS

Space relate us  
Time find us  
Earth birth us  
Sky mind us

Water daughter us  
Sun son us  
Garden guard us  
Weather pleasure us

Sunflower power us  
Roses arouse us  
Dandelion encourage us  
Carnation, make us citizens

Moon loosen us  
Stars farther us  
Sea, dream us  
Lake, make us

Selfheal, slough-heal, heal-all remember us  
Peonies, feel us, unfurl us  
Violets vivify us  
Marigold marry us

Cosmos gnosis us  
Florabunda dance dance  
Hydrangeas hydrate us  
Nasturtiums exert us  
Jasmine free jazz us

Heliotrope elope us  
Ranunculus ridiculous  
Anemones heal any enemies  
Buttercup sup us

## RETURN ADDRESS

Merlin Sheldrake

Life is a story of wild intimacies and relationships. Being is always being with. And being with requires an ability to communicate. Without an ability to communicate no creature could coordinate togetherness.

All organisms, humans included, live their lives bathed in rich fields of communication. Over evolutionary time, these fields of communication shape bodies and behaviours. Some species of fungus live inside grasses and produce fake flowers in place of the plant's own flowers. These bright yellow 'pseudoflowers' mimic the shape of the plant's flowers, reflect UV light, and produce volatile chemicals that attract bees. When the bees visit the pseudoflowers, they pick up fungal spores and carry them off to another plant and begin the process again. Cuckoo fungi convince termites to carry them into their nests by producing small balls that look like termite eggs which release a pheromone found in real termite eggs. Some species of orchid have evolved to mimic the appearance of sexually receptive female bees to tempt male bees into copulating with the plant and carrying its pollen from flower to flower. Every living creature has long evolutionary roots that stretch deep into the past, tangling and entwining with the roots of countless other species.

Most of these interactions pass over our heads, or under our feet. Almost all plants, for example, form symbiotic relationships with fungi that weave themselves through roots and provide plants with crucial nutrients. These relationships are intricately cultivated. Both fungi and plant roots face the challenge of finding one another amid the chemical babble in the soil where countless other roots, fungi and microbes course and engage. Each use volatile chemicals to communicate with one another. Receptive plant roots produce plumes of volatile compounds that drift through the soil and cause fungal spores to sprout and hyphae to branch and grow faster. Fungi produce plant growth hormones that manipulate roots, causing them to proliferate

into masses of feathery branches – with a greater surface area, the chances of an encounter between root tips and fungus become more likely. Fungi release chemicals that suspend their plant partners' immune responses, without which they can't get close enough to form symbiotic structures. Once established, these partnerships continue to develop. If you could place your olfactory epithelium into the soil, it would feel like the performance of a jazz group, with the players listening, interacting, responding to one another in real time.

Human history and prehistory are similarly entwined with the lives of other organisms, and there remain many ways in which nonhumans communicate with modern humans. Working animals, farm animals, and pets must communicate with their humans on a regular basis using sounds, facial expressions, and body language (domesticated dogs have evolved an ability to move their eyebrows in a way that mimics human facial expressions, an ability that their wild wolf ancestors do not have). Plants produce flowers, fruits, and psychoactive compounds that invite humans to cultivate them and spread them around the world, speaking languages of colour, smell, flavour, and neurochemistry. The communities of microbes that live in and on you produce countless compounds that alter your physiology and behaviours (the 'microbiome–gut–brain axis' – is far-reaching enough to have birthed a new field: neuromicrobiology). Viruses communicate with our bodies on a genetic level, altering the regular operation of our cells.

It's easy to forget that interspecies communication is a non-negotiable part of living and that our human-to-human interactions are just a tiny fraction of the vast currents of meaningful communication taking place at any one moment. Over the course of much of my scientific education, I learned that the non-human world is made up of self-replicating automata locked in robotic routines that maximise their chance of survival. I absorbed an ambient species narcissism that assumes humans are the only organisms able to communicate meaningfully because of the complexity of our nervous systems,

brains, and minds. I live within echo chambers that selectively amplify human chatter and preoccupations and help maintain the illusion that the many lives unfolding around me constitute my ‘environment’: a backdrop to the dramas of human life.

Are there ways that we can practice unforgetting this most vital aspect of the living world? Might we be able to expand some of our concepts, such that speaking might not always require a mouth, hearing might not always require ears, and interpreting might not always require a nervous system? Can we find ways to address the more-than-human world directly rather than speaking only about it?

Addressing the more-than-human world directly is central to many knowledge systems and traditions around the world. In *As We Have Always Done*, for example, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes how Nishnaabeg culture depends on carefully maintained ‘international’ relations between humans, salmon, deer, and others. The Amazonian Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa talks about learning how to call and listen to the animal ancestors from his shaman elders. In fact, any tradition involving prayer involves some kind of direct address to a more-than-human being. It is in the spirit of direct address that the ecologist and philosopher David Abram describes the practice of speaking ‘face-to-place’ – rather than only ‘face-to-face’ with other humans – as a way to feel a ‘forgotten intimacy between language and the more-than-human earth’.

Inspired by traditions of prayer and inter-species kinship, we have been exploring ways to bring to mind the fluid interplay of communication that we are all embedded within. Through the poetic practice of address, we hope to find ways to develop inter-species and inter-kingdom perception, literacy, and communication skills. Art – as a field of experiment, play and possibility – is an ideal place to ask qualitative questions about the possibilities of inter-species communication and relation that may be difficult or taboo in the modern sciences. Qualitative as well as quantitative literacy is key



to responding to intersecting climate and biodiversity crises: we increasingly need ways to perceive and care for others. Our practice has played out something like this:

1. Relational writing practice in the weather world, working with different plant, animal or geologic entity each day
2. Make offering: a compliment, a question, a gift
3. Take notes as raw material for poem using second person 'you' or 'thou'
4. From these notes compose poem/address and read it to who it is for \*

Linguistic communication is usually transmitted between speakers of a shared language, but this limits words to their semantic meaning alone. Intent, musicality, vibration, tone, body language, and other forms of communication that accompany speech are understood in communication studies to play as large a role in what is communicated than the words themselves. Poetry, as a form of speech concerned with the rhythm and music of language, is especially suited to communications where the addressed may not speak a modern human language, but could potentially receive its meaning in other ways.

We are not proposing that the more-than-human world will understand our human languages as we do. We are more interested in finding ways to behave as though humans are not the only beings worth addressing. Perhaps the act of speaking to the living world rather than about 'it' might help awaken us to the numberless fluxing channels of communication we live within, moment to moment. Perhaps these modes of address can invite us to remember the webs of relation that constitute our lives. Perhaps by directing our words towards the more-than-human, we might feel more vividly how porous we are. Perhaps these are processes that can reveal the places where our narratives of individuality and separation wear thin, revealing a vast conversational commons.

## ROSE

The sun was rose, rose  
coloured in the  
smoke was rose  
rising in smokelight  
rising from  
rot as roses, you do  
Or eyelids  
for the heart-so-tall  
so tall  
the heart  
opening and closing  
like a  
blink-washed eye  
multiplied  
As a rose of  
eyelids grown  
from rot  
to meet the need  
of tenderness  
pressed to each  
eye of the heart  
without you  
the sun would not  
be the dew  
you exude  
torched even once  
by the love of you  
Rose  
rising  
in the heart  
of the smoked-out eye

## **BORAGE**

Blue blue blue  
blue blue blue  
blue blue blue  
blows the throat  
flame. Borage!  
Give courage!  
For the fivefold flame  
of volunteer rage  
of boring through boredom  
Of drilling through dust  
Of heavenly downspouts  
Of hairy diadems  
Of uncorked presence  
Of edible skies  
Of the blue flame  
Of the black whiskered centre  
Of survivors who thrive  
as a flame in the throat  
of the flower of justice  
How we pertain to ourselves & the violet  
evening & the green of night & the silver morning

## AIR

O  
homeostatic circuits  
of love between  
lung & leaf!

O orb  
of air I wear for  
intimacy's occasion

O  
land of lost spores  
O of all thoughts

Given away a way –

Airspace of opulent  
openings

Time goes in an  
O  
is gone

Black as fog the night

O interstitial tissue of space

O  
clairvoyant air

O ovoid flame  
of DAY huffed through the  
face

O



tidal NIGHT where air becomes  
visible black! O aerial depths of black as fog  
the NIGHT

O spacetime flying apart in all ways  
Cut with a knife mends  
automatically

O broth of the world, made of  
breathing this rhythm  
of need of give

This rhythm makes a net  
of noses, hungriest orifice  
of knowing

Of breathing who breathes  
nutrients a body must  
say

On the outbreath  
direction of a gift

whO  
opens & closes  
internal lung wings

O oxygen  
enema of the nostril  
O open rhizome of space!

O breather who breathes  
the dead burned as fuel  
as refinery's incense

O

as I move through your lungs  
in a hotbox round

O  
huffed gas of a dead idea

O air conspire with us in homeostatic  
subterfuge to uncook the world without  
dimming the sun

Sending a permanent migraine into orbit  
to which we say NO

O  
air conspire with us  
to NO until wealth weather unbecomes us  
or let breathing be left, let the west wind know

## SELF-HEAL

You sing yourself open-mouthed  
in the dried-up lawn, singing low  
to the ground & lowly  
in the round

Doubt-healer  
debt-dissolver  
sing yourself solvent

As the mower passes over  
your medicines       *replicate*  
                              *articulate*  
                              *in triplicate*  
                              self-sung

Who of us can weather such  
antison?

Who sings us to flower  
through our mouths a vibratory  
sheath of song

O small purple flowers with a mouth!  
O bitter invasive healing power  
for the heart, the mouth!  
The lymph for moving anger!

## OCEAN

O ocean ancestress  
of ancient secretions  
Who moves shorelines while we sleep  
Who rewrites the lines by licking  
You who alleviate certainty  
Who uphold the right to float  
To exist as a shimmer  
as hermaphroditic jelly  
in an ocean of sound  
You who move oceans  
moonwards & onwards  
on the rim of a dream  
in which my mother explained  
if you try and yang the process it stalls  
because you can't yank out yin  
You have to languish in language  
a while  
You have to float in the ocean of it  
all milky and lost in formation  
as a dreaming cloud becoming



the spank of a wave  
who crashes into the blue  
depth of you whose moods  
move to tears then excellence  
Speaking of excellence I shit a brick  
in a sequin shirt, regularly  
I learned it from you  
how to sparkle and tantrum  
as spectral goddess dripping  
~  
into abominations of feeling  
As unhinged jaws of 13 arms no eyes  
crushing facts into a poultice of the feeling  
who rocked me til I returned to brine  
where the new creatures are born!  
Where the new episteme is trying! to be born!  
To rise! To rose! To have risen!  
Through our eyes, nose, the motion  
The motion  
It takes an ocean to move an ocean

## SOIL

Hello below

Are you the past?  
Are you the future?  
Are you fungal  
galaxies

Are you bright green need

Descending goes summer's  
daughter down the curl  
of time's underside, a cell  
budded from a dead-end

Loss is not  
linear mere

A day is made  
& then undone  
for who's to come  
from below  
a day is made

& then undone

The night might come  
The day may decay

(The day's ray  
decays)

The night must be  
the compost  
heap of day

& the source  
of its coursing molecule  
by molecule  
minerals gather  
as memory  
reborn

to kiss you

## MOSS

Moss when you suffer you really do  
go mangy as a dog in the sun it's been  
so dry. I need shade, give me shadows  
I find you there. I hope it's okay to lay  
my dried out brain next to yours & feel  
bad & talk about it too long. It's a luxury  
to turn crispy & complain like we should  
*Where is the rain?* Where is the juice that  
restoreth this body to green & greening  
opulence of rock, of rotten log  
sprung in green so extreme it hydrates  
a dried out heart who needs  
funfur unrolling in the shadows that  
thrive still in the gutters & the shade  
I need rain I need you, I need velvet  
that tells the truth like you do



## MOON

They said you were geologically dead  
and they would say that about who

makes the seeds cream, the oceans move  
in me, whose calendar revolves

whose calendar of absence  
whose calendar is change

who walks me home.  
O moon make me less blurry!

Make me a detailed plan through  
swarms of death beside and below

travelling this edible sprawling body  
through abyssal fractals leaning

back to my origin's origin, continuing  
in the deep element to find my mind

by flap and by shimmer, onward toward  
I do not know – into the deep curtain, the vast I

sometimes stupidly certain I am totally lost  
or have never been. It makes me happy just to try  
to describe

the delicate green landings of the pine  
flying in a hectic jagged way

I would spend all my money  
admiring your language

in moonbaked sheets  
the small blue, the oily black

wode when I first saw you  
and my concepts went driving slowly away

into a different muscle group entirely  
like upside down against a wall

taking in your light, transforming it  
in my body – *pressure, succession, heat*

How to say it straight  
what turns around

into a swan, a pulse  
leaking all over the floor

dissolving in it, o moon

The wound gets healed  
The wound gets healed

O moon !

## ROCK

Bone of the world  
    rocking us  
    through space  
Felting mountains  
from bodies at the bottom  
    of the sea – orogeny  
        *pressure*  
    *succession, heat –*  
A soft life rising  
    into permanent  
    change we ride  
    on inner mineral  
Our flesh extends  
    in all directions, you said  
Like the burning of the sun  
Like the rocking of the boat  
Like the churning of the world  
Whose bones are the folds  
    of your face  
    of the earth the face

of a rockface pressed

to my head

I call you up

bone of the world

to ask you

to press stress

into sparkle

to fold love

into the rocking

of time

## SKY

O Great blue ear  
Spherical ear  
Minimal blue  
helmet of you  
whose listening is  
the shifting wind  
the forming forms  
morphing across  
the day as the day  
in and out of haze  
Whose folds are the  
looping back of a ray  
an angle of you O blue  
curve of your skull  
sent into orbit, everywhere  
I go is the central axis  
of my skull-rhyme  
with you O blue  
mind minding us  
as the day  
comes closer, bolder  
blindfolded, sky black  
night!

Yesterday  
was the hottest day on record  
in 120 000 years

With weapons like these

Weapons like you

Breathed full of big  
as blue as you

to hold more of what  
a person can  
if any less  
small, when you're vast

I bloom room in me  
just looking  
into your  
voluminousness  
for moods that will  
sink the government  
of Chevron

## RAVEN

Raving like you should  
*Can we be a politics of wind?*  
The weather is the government!

Rave on sweet raven!  
Hoarse with the truth  
greasy with truth, shining  
in its decadence  
The truth of your strut  
and the light upon it  
The blue of it the black  
and the truth of the rug  
beaten above our brains the  
truth of this anarchist tryst  
with you who moves so  
anciently avant-garde  
in the disappearance  
of forms

## **RETURN ADDRESS: Writing practice**

1. Spend at least 10 minutes in open attention, noticing the beings around you. Offer your full attention, noticing detail with all your senses. How do the beings around you 'speak'? Communication may include colour, texture, form, vocalization, movement, smell, ++.

2. Notice what you notice and who has spoken to you, and gather these notes/impressions in your notebook for 20 mins, addressing them directly (second person you, your, thou):

- Pay a specific compliment: "I love how you..."
- Write down what you notice about them, in as impressionistic language as you like: "black shimmer shimmer"
- Ask them a question(s) about themselves: "Who are you root?" "Why do you ooze?"
- From these beginnings, continue to freewrite an address / poem / letter to this being. You do not have to make sense, and do not have to use sentences – let yourself play in language, remaining attentive to who you're addressing.

3. Read what you've written aloud to who it's for. Feel free to change things as you read, as new information or impulses come to you. It can be awkward to learn to speak to people you're not used to – smile at awkwardness :) See how your addressee wants to be spoken to – do you need to get close, or sing, or whisper it? Repeat a certain phrase? Play with your address, and notice any responses that come, in any form.



Copyright © Erin Robinsong & Merlin Sheldrake, 2024.

Designed, typeset & handbound by Erin Robinsong in a Limited Edition  
of 77 copies.

Thank you to Maleea Acker and Engage with Nature-based Solutions for inviting this work, and to the elements and creatures to who these poems are addressed, who inspired and engaged in their creation. Gratitude to everyone who participated in the workshops we gave where we all practiced the ancient art of addressing the world directly. Our version of this practice appears at the end of this book, and we invite you to practice with us.

skyebound press \* 2023 \* [erin@skyebound.com](mailto:erin@skyebound.com)

