

# Rethinking Fables in the Age of Global Environmental Crisis

## Storytelling Event

May 24, 2025, 6-8pm, Gulbenkian Theatre



### Programme

Prologue (Kaori Nagai / Ryan Perry)

**Terefe Mitiku**, The Farmer, Snake, Livestock, and the Ape: An Oromo fable

**Matilda Leyser**, Experiments in Becoming an 'It'

**Chris Danta**, The Stochastic Parrot: A Fable

**Jeremy Scott**, Gibby the Goblin Misunderstands The Kalevala

**Kathryn Kirkpatrick**, Creaturely Fables

Break (15min)

**Cass Lynch**, How to Read a Poem to a Spider

**Suniti Namjoshi**, In a Working Paradise

**Emily Doolittle**, **Lesley Harrison**, **Alex South**, The Gannet and the Whale



Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

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**Kent**

Institute of Cultural  
and Creative Industries  
**icci**

**Rethinking Fables in the Age of Global Environmental Crisis** (2023-2025) is an AHRC-funded networking project, led by Dr. Kaori Nagai, Senior Lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Kent. Since its launch in June 2023, we have held a series of fable-themed workshops, to develop innovative approaches to the genre. We have also collaborated to produce new fables, befitting to tell stories of our times, taking seriously diverse non-human forces that shape the stories of our world, such as climate change and AI as talking nonhumans, drawing on fables of different cultural and linguistic traditions, including non-European and indigenous fables.

This storytelling event, which is part of our final conference, showcases fables that emerged from our activities, along with works by some of the fabulists we connected with through this project.

Please also check out our online exhibition, which feature some highlights from our networking events. <https://www.rethinking-fables.org.uk/>

We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for funding this project, and the Institute of Cultural and Creative Industries (iCCi) for their support and for making this storytelling event possible.

We are also grateful to you for coming along to be part of this storytelling event. We'd like to know how you found it, so please use this QR code to access the online survey.



## Terefe Mitiku, The Farmer, Snake, Livestock, and the Ape: An Oromo fable

The Oromo are an indigenous people in the Horn of Africa, predominantly living in Ethiopia, but also with a significant presence in Kenya. They are considered to be practitioners of a traditional way of life and a nature-friendly worldview. My research focuses on the ecological knowledge culture of the Oromo, especially expressed in oral traditional fables of the Oromo people in Ethiopia. In this performance I will be telling one of the fables I learned from the elders of the community.

This Oromo fable, which starts with the farmer chancing upon a snake needing assistance to cross a river, illuminates our relationship and interaction with other species: how we collaborate, exploit, and coexist with them. I will tell this fable to challenge concepts of human independence, hypocrisy, and stewardship: humans are not at the centre of ecology but one among many agents; all are interconnected, and the boundary between human and non-human species is unclear. The fable will also give valuable insights into how we need to live together with other species amid changing societal structures and ongoing global environmental crisis.

**Terefe Mitiku** is an assistant professor at the Department of Oromo Folklore and Literature, Jimma University. His project is titled 'Human and non-human Interaction in Oromo Oral Fables', and he is participating as a member in the project 'Oral Literature for Development'—'Storytelling and Young People Coping with Crisis: Oral Narratives and Crisis Management in Kenya and Ethiopia' with other colleagues.

## Matilda Leyser, Experiments in Becoming an 'It'

*What separated the Anthropocene from the Holocene was that Homo Sapiens had invested itself with geological power. People were shifting from subjects to objects, graduating into an ontological category populated by mountains, oceans and ozone...It seemed to me that we had a duty to contend with our newfound status. Even small inroads of understanding might help us inhabit it more responsibly. So, I tried in vain to assume this new role, to become an 'it' and see how it felt.*

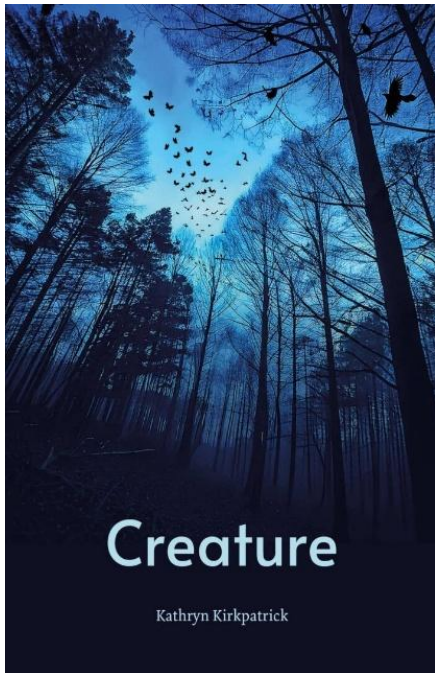
-- From *Warmth* by Daniel Sherrell.

Some short experiments in giving a voice or a viewpoint to the non-verbal, to the 'it's, the things who have a wholly different sense of self, to the 'I's whose identity is defined by living within a linguistic system. Using language to articulate the experience of the non-verbal is inherently impossible, but that need not negate the value of the attempt. The cast of characters may include: a candle; a sea sponge; a salt crystal, a tree.



**Matilda Leyser** read English Literature at King's College, London, received an award for obtaining the top first across the whole of London university, but then ran away to join the circus. She trained as an aerialist, working up a rope, collaborating with dance and theatre companies, making her own work, and performing in diverse venues, including the National Theatre, Shakespeare's Globe, and the Royal Opera House. After fifteen years in the air, she decided to come down to earth and take up the far more dangerous act of writing on the ground. She has published one novel, [No Season but the Summer](#) with Scribe Publications, and is currently working on her second within a practice-as-research PhD at Kent University, funded via a scholarship from the Institute of Cultural and Creative Industries. She is the mother of two neurodivergent children and is the founder and director of an international movement for women and non-binary people called [M/Others who Make](#). She is also a Co-Artistic Director of [Improbable](#), a world-renowned company of theatre makers, conversation facilitators and improvisers.

## Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Creaturely Fables



The efficacy of the fable as a form in our era of climate crisis is undeniable: the fable's strengths are precisely the pondering and positing of moral concerns, an approach much needed as the anthropogenic effects of climate change intensify. Amitav Ghosh has argued that unlike realistic fiction, poetry is adept at engaging climate issues. Yet how do we bring the preference for the open-ended and the evocative in contemporary poetry in English together with the explicit moral favored by the fable? Moreover, in an era of animal studies, where the desire to move beyond instrumentalizing other animals as symbols for purely anthropocentric concerns is important, how does the speaking animal of fables show up as more than a mouthpiece for an anthropocentric morality? In this reading, I work to address these questions as both academic and practicing poet by exploring poems in my new collection, *Creature* (Jacar Press, 2025), that take seriously other animals as the subject of their own lives. Many of the poems include listening narrators who are taught lessons by their encounters with other animals.

**Kathryn Kirkpatrick** is Professor of English at Appalachian State University, where she teaches environmental literature, animal studies, and Irish studies from an ecofeminist perspective. She has published essays on class trauma, eco-feminist poetics, and animal studies, focusing particularly on the work of Dublin poet Paula Meehan. Kirkpatrick is also the author of eight collections of poetry, including three recipients of the NC Poetry Society's Brockman-Campbell award, *The Body's Horizon* (1996), *Our Held Animal Breath* (2012), and *Her Small Hands Were Not Beautiful* (2014). *The Fisher Queen: New & Selected Poems* (Salmon, 2019) received the NC Literary and Historical Society's Roanoke Chowan Poetry Prize. *Creature* was published by Jacar Press in 2025. Her website is:

<https://www.kathrynkirkpatrick.org/>

## Chris Danta, The Stochastic Parrot: A Fable

### Jeremy Scott, Gibby the Goblin Misunderstands The Kalevala

In the 'Rethinking Fables' project, one of our key themes was the concept of AI/Cyber fables, through which we aimed to explore the ethical, social, and personal impacts of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies on our lives. These are two fables emerging out of this thematic focus of the project.

**Chris Danta** is Professor of literature in the School of Cybernetics at the ANU in Canberra, Australia. He recently held an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship (2021-24), leading a project titled 'Future Fables: Literature, Evolution and Artificial Intelligence'.

**Jeremy Scott** is Senior Lecturer in Film and Media Practice at the University of Kent. His teaching and research focuses on creative practice in film, media and literature and on intersections between language and literary studies. He teaches in the areas of film and media practice, stylistics, narratology, creative writing and cognitive approaches to the arts and humanities, particularly cognitive poetics.



## Cass Lynch, How to Read a Poem to a Spider



How can – and should we – read a poem to a spider? If the fable is a genre which stages an encounter between language and the nonhuman world, what happens when we touch spiders with our words, and how might we do so caringly, so as not to harm their world?

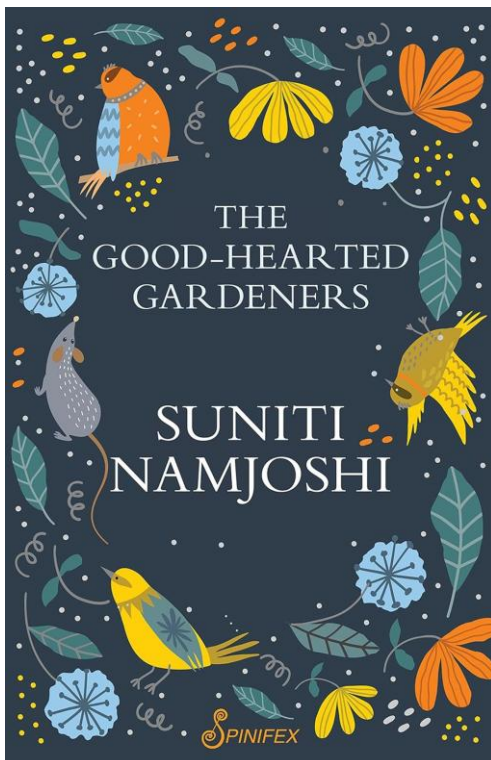
'How to Read a Poem to a Spider' is a fruit of interdisciplinary conversations and collaboration, emerging from the 'Rethinking Fables' networking project. This art/science collaboration originated in the Spider Fable Workshop in January 2024. Since then, we have remained in

touch, dreaming up and developing ideas for spider fables, and our creative writer Cass Lynch volunteered to weave our ideas into fables. 'How to Read a Poem to a Spider' takes the form of a poem, 'visualised' by a spider sculpture, created by British artist Josie Turnbull, who joined us to visualise /materialise these fables.

**Cass Lynch** is a Noongar woman, and writer and researcher. She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Curtin University in Perth, and her PhD explored Aboriginal stories that reference climate change. She is a member of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories group who focus on the revitalisation of song and language connected to south coast Noongar people. Her borongur/totem is the Trapdoor Spider and this inspires her in writing about ecology, deep time, relationality, temporality, and language.

## Suniti Namjoshi, In a Working Paradise

Suniti Namjoshi is a poet, a satirist, a feminist and perhaps best known as a fabulist. Her books include *Feminist Fables*, *The Blue Donkey Fables*, *The Fabulous Feminist*, *Suki*, *Aesop the Fox*, *The Good-Hearted Gardeners and Matriarchs*, *Cows and Epic Villains*.

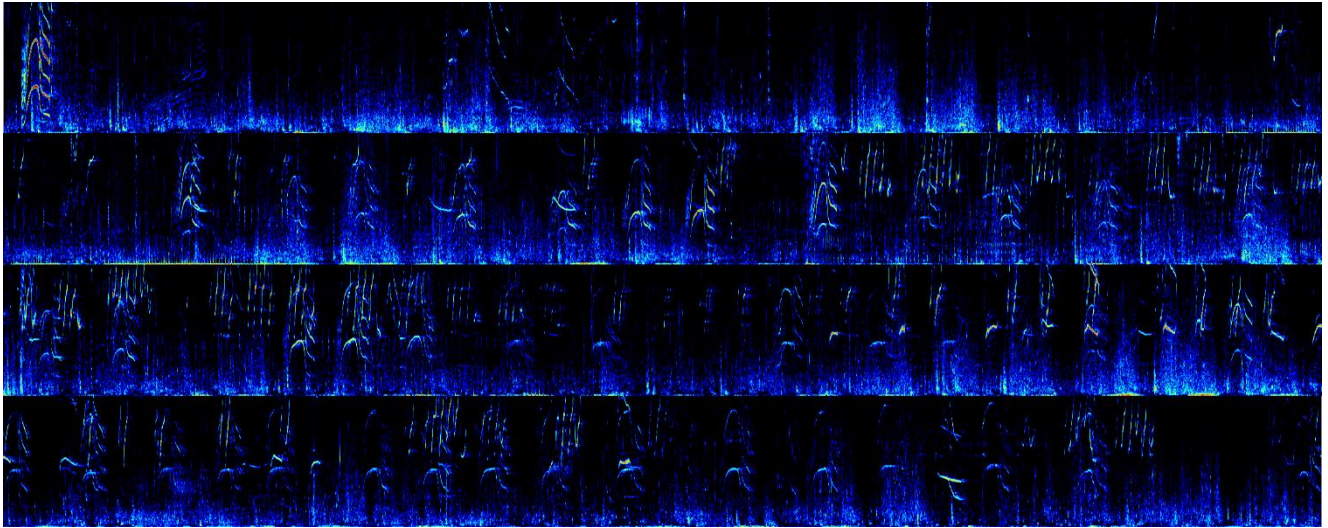


She will read from her fables – both old and new – to reflect on her changing attitudes towards animals and towards the environment over a very long period. One of the questions she asks is whether a working paradise is possible and concludes that in such a paradise ‘even lions are allowed to live’.

Here are the first few line of her poem 'In a Working Paradise':

*There may be a place  
                where bees go about  
tending cells, collecting pollen,  
                                stashing honey;  
while in the wide world  
                nothing bad happens.  
It's just another  
                                summer's day.*

Don't bees die?  
Do the seasons not change?



## The Gannet and the Whale

*Imagine an ocean*

In this performance, the ecology and sounds of the North Atlantic inspire an "anti-fable" of the pilot whale and the gannet, a poetic meditation on the encounters between surfacing marine mammals and diving seabirds that occur in the upper layers of the ocean. Acoustic representations of the geophony and biophony of more-than-human worlds occur in counterpoint with anthropogenic sonic immissions: mechanical "sounds out of place".

*It happened slowly, then all at once*

Lesley Harrison's newly commissioned text, 'The Middle Deeps', frames and recontextualizes Emily Doolittle's 'Gannetry' for solo clarinet and electronics, played here by Alex South. The mimesis of seabirds is brought into conversation with improvisations on recordings of long-finned pilot whales provided by bioacoustician Elizabeth Zwamborn. The performance as a whole falls into three sections. These are played without a break; each could be the end, middle, or beginning of the tale.

*There was a bird, and there was a whale, and they lived in the deep blue sea...*

**Emily Doolittle** was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1972, and now lives in Glasgow, Scotland, where she is an Athenaeum Research Fellow and Lecturer in Composition at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She has written for ensembles such as Symphony Nova Scotia, the Glasgow University Chapel Choir, the Vancouver Symphony, and Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal, and soloists such as pianist Rachel Iwaasa and soprano Patricia Green. She has an ongoing interest in zoomusicology—the relationship between animal songs and music—which she explores in both her composition and through interdisciplinary collaboration with biologists. Doolittle's participation in the 'Rethinking fables' conference was made possible by Athenaeum Award Funding from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

**Lesley Harrison** lives on Scotland's north-east coast, and in her poetry and prose she records its layers of occupation, its languages and its deep, ancient orientation towards the north. Her writing takes place among the soundscapes, migration routes, relics and

settlements of the North Atlantic rim, and asks how our experience of these is thinned or altered in this age of sudden change. The whale recurs throughout her writing as a reminder of the real proximity of the marvellous. Lesley has held residencies in Iceland, Greenland and Svalbard, and is a member of the North Sea Poets collective.

**Alex South** ([alexsouth.org](http://alexsouth.org)) is a musician and researcher with a passion for multispecies musicking: paying musical attention to the sounds of other animals with the goal of mutual flourishing. Based in Scotland, where he holds a Postdoctoral Fellowship at IASH (University of Edinburgh), his improvisations and compositions are often inspired and informed by the voices of cetaceans. Recent pieces include 'CETACEA' (with Katherine Wren and Lesley Harrison), described by The Wire as "keening lines of whale song; a beautiful study". Other works by Alex featured in 'The Musical Animal' broadcast by the CBC. He performs regularly with Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra on clarinet and bass clarinet.