

# DYING TO LIVE

by Ali Lees



*Fig. 1 Wheatfield (1982)*

'As artists we conjure magical figures, weave speculative fictions, animate feral and partial connections. We necessarily stumble. And try again. With every mark, difference haunts and struggles to appear anew.' (Haraway, 2017:G12)

## Introduction

This essay will explore my understandings through the lens of Shamanism, which is a psycho-spiritual and therapeutic practice: a holistic viewpoint that has informed my artwork and life for many years.

There have been a lot of significant endings for me over the last 10 years and very recently my mother died. The releasing and letting go I intimately witnessed over the last year, especially the last few months of her life, was a rite of passage for her. Now the period of bereavement marks another phase for me.

My collaboration with the flow of life in nature around me is steadfast and an inspiration to my artwork. This personal time encompassing loss, grief, fear and sadness can't be stopped, however uncomfortable, and the analogy of riding a wave, letting the tide take me, is a supportive one.

I would suggest that we humans are also going through a similar rite of passage in our relationship with the earth, who is considered by many as another mother. In this essay my focus is on allowing and surrendering to natural cycles in order to come out of the other side of the trouble we are in, in one piece.

The climate crisis, loss of biodiversity and habitat and resources for all species is mirrored in many fields of human endeavour: Ecologically, Politically, Economically, Spiritually and of course Artistically.

The breadth of all this ignited my interest and flavoured my research. I will explore how artists and writers are reflecting on these thoughts and imagining how this can bring us clarity and resolve in this time of ecological disaster.

I will focus on human and other-than-human elements, which includes the emotional and spiritual impact at this crucial time. The 'other-than-human' element I refer to is discussed by leading writers on the Anthropocene and Animism, such as Donna Haraway and Graham Harvey, who question the commonest view of our western society where we regard humankind as having dominion over the entire planet.

'Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others.' (Harvey, 2017:xiii)

Similarly, in shamanism, 'other-than-human' encompasses the above quote.

I'm going to investigate the narrative that flows between indigenous cultures past and present in relation to the present day. I am also going to bring in contemporary artists, writers and thinkers who are embedded in a culture that generally seems disconnected from Nature, but who are questioning the anthropocentric views as well as exploring ways to reconnect their audience with the living planet. I am going to

look at artists who engage with the interconnectedness between the planetary emergency and Art.

## **The Current Situation**

There is no denying that the climate crisis is being talked about, but arguments at government level abound as to how much needs to be done, by whom and by when. Undoubtedly a young woman from Sweden called Greta Thunberg has taken the world by its' business shirt collar and has shaken us awake, motivating young people from across the globe to engage in activism. She has highlighted the possibility of children losing out on life because of the grown-ups disconnect to their children's future and we're having to look at our children's dying way before their time. At present, the changes that have been agreed by the IPCC (the UN body governing carbon emissions) will come too late and governments are just handing the dreadful baton of deepening and devastating climate destruction to Greta's children, where flooding, forest fires and starvation of many of our worlds people will be an everyday event. We're being forced to look at our own mortality as we realise that continued life is not guaranteed.

What, to me, is being highlighted is a disconnect from that which gives us life, that is our planet. 'Whatever we do to the web of life we do to ourselves' (Chief Seattle, 1992) However in the very action of looking at the dire consequences we humans rise up and find solutions instead of focusing on fatalistic doom. Donna Haraway says

'The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response. Mixed up times are overflowing with both pain and joy, with unnecessary killing of ongoingness but also with necessary resurgence.' (Haraway, 2016:1)

## **Circles and Cycles**

There is a cyclical flow in nature. We move through seasons. We have a daily template for change whether it be light or the tides around our island. I work closely with the cycles in nature. The sun rises everyday and the moon is full once a month. Our natural cycles are dictated by this very journey of the sun, the moon and the axis of our planet. There are seasons of light and growth and seasons of darkness and dying.

As I write we are in Midwinter here in the northern hemisphere. Growing has stopped and all seems to be in retreat. Light and life has withdrawn.

'Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalised this horror of the dark.' (Cixous, 2016)

The leaf mould however is sheltering the new growth of spring. As this occurs in nature I observe this happening physiologically, emotionally and spiritually within humans too.

‘As within, so without’ or ‘as above, so below’ this is an aphorism attributed with sacred geometry. Sandra Ingerman explains ‘All esoteric traditions embrace’ this ‘belief’ ‘the understanding that if God created humankind in his own image, then God lives inside us as well as outside us.’ (Ingerman, 2000:44)

The discussion and exploration of renewal is vital in the debate about the Climate Crisis and how to address it at a fundamental grassroots level. Winona La Duke Environmentalist, Economist and Activist says ‘The continuous rebirth is part of the duty of being human. There are cycles of regeneration.’ (*Winona La Duke & Naomi Klein: Land Rights & Climate Change*, 2019)

The notion of renewal and regeneration has been reserved hitherto for gardening programmes or parts of society considered to be more hippy!

Within indigenous cultures, however, we can find the same power of rotation and return; the same axis around which the cosmos and the people, time, history, and the cycles and ceremonies of renewal turn in their rotation. To experience or participate in any of these ceremonies or different connection to Life is to be led into a profoundly different reality and connection to the life we encounter in our everyday western mindset. How we frame our world is very different. How did western societies become so disconnected from Life and in turn from Death?

‘Indigenous people are indigenous because there are no machines between them and their gods. There are no machines barring the door to the spirit world where one can enter in and listen to what is going on within at a deep level, participating in the vibration of Nature. Where machines speak in the place of gods, people are hard put to listen, even more hard put to vibrate with the realm of Nature’ (Ingerman, 2000:9)

Outi Pieski, a Sami woman from northern Finland, is a great example of a visual artist who has this strong connection between nature and the spirit world.

In her installation at the Royal Festival hall in London in 2017 she collaborated with the Northern lights and her peoples stories to make *Falling Shawls*. In Sami tradition, the Northern Lights are seen as spirits of ancestors and it represents a ‘flock’ of spirits, the representation of humanity and people amongst nature.

Outi Pieski said

‘For me, *Falling Shawls* is about how very different our realities are from each other, even though we live in the same space and time. The installation is not one whole object, but many fragments you must see and feel.’ (Pieski, 2019)

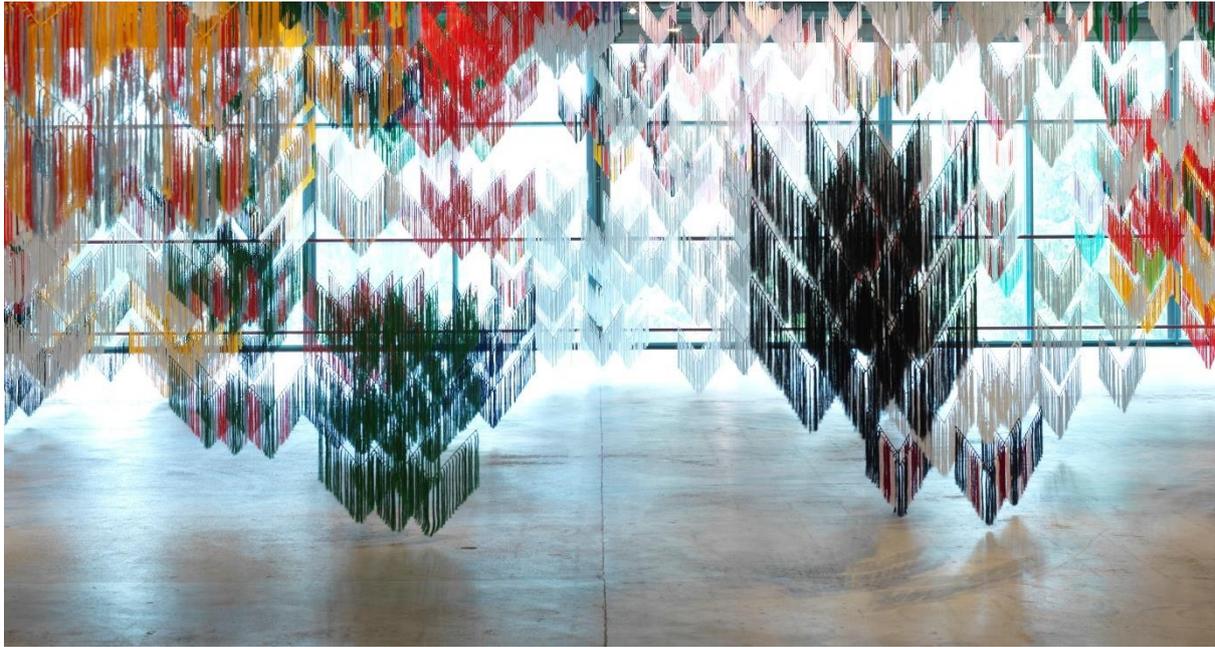


Fig. 2. - Falling Shawls (2017)

## Transitions

We have Rites of Passage, for example, birth, puberty, menopause and those times in life where we step through physical and metaphorical gateways. We do not mark these in the same way that other cultures do.

Grayson Perry showed how people honoured their dead around the world in his documentary called *Rites of Passage*. He also made particularly powerful piece by creating a ceremony for a couple as they divorced and found a conscious closure within a ritual. The couple, with their grown-up daughters, gathered their friends together. They spoke, giving thanks to their, now, former partner. Perry had created a banner to represent the former relationship which the couple then cut in two. It was naturally a difficult thing to do. To observe this ceremony was powerful for all involved. Witnessing this would, in my view, bring a healing to the whole community. At the end he invited the gathered friends and family to pin the split banner back together again. In my opinion the ending was too Hollywood and rituals of this nature I have done are better left with definite closure. (*Grayson Perry: Rites of Passage*, 2018)

Jae Rhim Lee is a transdisciplinary artist, designer, and entrepreneur who is reimagining our basic life systems and proposing new models. Through her project about death she is encouraging a more direct and honest approach which invites responsibility. As a western society, we don't consider the very toxic impact of the burial or cremation process. Through her direct approach we can be more involved with the real natural process of death and this in turn helps transition.

'The Infinity Burial Project ... examines modern funeral practices and offers alternative post-mortem options that embrace natural decomposition and decay and the socio-cultural acceptance of death... A burial suit infused with mush-

room mycelia and bacteria that facilitates the decomposition of the body, cleans toxins, and helps plants grow.’ (Lee, 2019)

The transitional place humans are currently in and where I personally find myself after the death of my mum talks of Liminality, further exploration of which term is regrettably beyond the scope of this essay. It is a place filled with ambiguities. In essence the word liminality means ‘threshold’. The anthropologist Arnold van Gennep initially coined the term in his book Rites of Passage and Victor Turner developed the concept further in 1969. Both look at the ritual practice of it being ‘a phase of transition in which a person is no longer what they were, but it is not yet what they will be. The liminal is the in between, the neither one thing nor the other.’ (Buchanan, 2010:294)

### **Death of a Mindset.**

Many people, intellectuals, artists, and indigenous activists seem to be singing from the same hymn sheet. The song is about being on the threshold of a different future on the planet.

Philosopher Timothy Morton who took part in the recent Eco Visionaries exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London speaks of how we need to move from a place of pessimism and to ‘re-ignite people’s ability to hope’ He goes on to say

‘we’re already living the data, were hitting ourselves over the head with it. When you open the newspaper, everything’s shocking and then the next day there’s a whole new set of numbers. Something slightly gentler could bring people in, although this shouldn’t just be a kind of PR for data, some nice art-flavoured candy to help us swallow these horrible-tasting pieces of data. I’ve had enough of being slapped by these numbers. We need to start living it.’

He speaks about ‘one way to do this is to restart our ability to visualise because visualisation is all about opening yourself up to the future.’ (Morton, 2019:21)

In my capacity as a Shamanic practitioner I have assisted the dying and dead and those close to them. This work is commonly called psychopomping. The psychopomp literally means ‘The one who conducts souls from this world to the next.’ Another name is midwife of the soul. (Merriam-Webster, 2009)

I feel we need to be psychopomped as people, as a species, in order for us to move on and transition to the next place of our evolution!

Shamanic practice tells us, as I have personally experienced, that many people are so medicated at the time of their dying that it is hard for them to let go and actually die and they get stuck between one world and another; in a liminal place. Sandra Ingerman explains

‘In this role’ as a psychopomp ‘the shaman helps the deceased. In a sudden or traumatic death such as in an auto accident or a train or plane crash, or

murder or suicide, a person may not have made a smooth transition....it is the shaman's role to lead the lost soul from that place.' (Ingerman, 1993:178)

'Death may not, after all, be the end of life; after death comes the strange life of ghosts. Helene Cixous suggests that ghosts are uncanny because they stop the proper separation between life and death; they mark a "between that is tainted with strangeness" Such strangeness, the uncanny nature of nature, abounds in the Anthropocene, where life persists in the shadow of mass death'. This suggests to me the similar 'stuckness'. (Tsing, 2017:G8)

## **The Era of Man.**

The Anthropocene is well documented as the Era where the earth has been affected most, not by tectonic plate shifts or dinosaurs but by the effects of man.

At the same time that the People of Turtle island, which is the name given to the Americas by the first inhabitants, were being enslaved the Steam engine was being marketed to European industrialists who were being sold the idea that this technology would enable them to be all powerful. Fossil fuels later allowed them to power these dreams. No one thought about the consequences.

We have been brought up to generally think that what nature has is for the taking. We live in an extractive economy which requires nature be controlled and dominated as much as possible.

It is easy to forget that every single thing we use originates from nature. The contents of our medicine cabinets, our clothing, the warmth in our homes and our technology.

Dams are built, forests are burned and replanted with cash crops and ancient trees are felled to make way for rail links.

The Extractive economy, getting the most out of a resource, a worker or a planet does not respect life. It's this capitalistic model that is no longer working and it is under more scrutiny now as progressive movements make their challenges. Timothy Morton says we need to

'imagine another kind of economic system. I don't see why it should be so hard to imagine: even a slightly different capitalistic system would help. We can do it: there was a 90% tax rate in the 1960's and 1970's in America and rich people did pay 90% tax. I think it's likely that human beings will finally start taking money back from the neo-liberal entities that have hoovered it up and use those resources to change things. The solutions are really very simple, boring and low-level. Intellectuals and cool kid artists want it to be something really special and amazing, but really it's about persuading people to pay more money.' (Morton, 2019:26)

Agnes Denes 'Wheat field – A confrontation' 1982. 'In an act of protest against climate change and economic inequality, Denes planted a massive wheat field in a landfill in downtown Manhattan. Nearly 40 years later her message reverberates with

a poignant urgency'. The site was audacious being in the shadow of the World Trade Centre and the incongruity of a food crop growing in New York City for the first time in 300 years brought attention. Instead of doing another public art project Wheatfield 'grew out of the longstanding concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values," People came from the office buildings and 'it became their field," The participation and the 'feeling it created' is what Agnes Denes wanted. The work is still very relevant as a symbol and a universal concept that invites people to rethink their priorities. She commented that "Digging deep is what art is all about."

Agnes Denes literally did the groundwork for her piece. She experienced the process of planting, tending and harvesting the famous field of wheat. Not only was she intimately experiencing the season and wheats' cycle but sharing the harvest and sharing the grain for the following years crop elsewhere in America. (Denes, 2019)

## **Prophecies**

No one would listen to indigenous folk around the world who had sophisticated ways of collaborating with nature and saw the extractive and destructive mindset of the colonisers. Their views are increasingly prescient in the current spotlight on climate crisis.

'There are native elders who believe that today the time has come for them to speak again, that now the White Man is now willing to listen. Their prophecies also talk of a time of purification. To some this means a period of devastation when Mother Earth cleanses herself and renews the processes of life across the planet. Others interpret this as an opportunity for transformation, for global devastation can be prevented provided that the races cooperate, hand in hand toward a renewal of our relationship with all of nature and with each other.' (Peat, 1994:10)

Winona La Duke, who is a Native American environmentalist, economist and writer, speaks of her People's Ojibwe prophesy and that we have now reached the time of the Seventh Fire when have to choose one of two paths. The first path is 'scorched.' She speaks of how this is what we are seeing right now in the extraction methods for fossil fuels and minerals all over the planet. The second, more hopeful path is one of Life. She says 'you cannot get Life out of what you want to destroy' (*Winona La Duke & Naomi Klein: Land Rights & Climate Change*, 2019)

There are many other similar prophecies that show that we have a choice should we choose to take it.

## **Collaboration with Nature.**

'Artists have the capacity to shape climate communications, solutions and engagement. We can use our unique skill sets to heal communities, tackle complex challenges and even create innovative answers.' (Mosher, 2018)

As Artists collaborate with nature, they bring focus to something the audience may not ordinarily take much notice of.

Sam Lee who is a singer and traditional music specialist is bringing collaborative performances with nature into the mainstream. In May 2019 I went to an unusual concert called Singing with Nightingales. Into the auditorium came a band of musicians who wanted no clapping or usual theatre behavior! Instead we gathered together in the first few rows. This event brought nature directly into the heart of a slightly fusty and well-behaved regional theatre unused to this kind of performance. The artist, Sam Lee and two fellow musicians wove together the sad tale of the rapid demise of the Nightingale. They sang songs of this land with simple but haunting arrangements and at the given time, by way of outside broadcast, tuned into a rural spot in Sussex where a friend of his had everything set up for when the Nightingales started to sing in the May evening. The bird sang the glorious song into this auditorium that was now dark and silent apart from this. Then the musicians gently started to collaborate with the Nightingale and created the perfect improvisation that was incredibly moving as it highlighted the bird's preciousness.

Imagine you are a leaf on a tree and it's October. Unlike a human you don't have the propensity to cling on but you let go and fall to the floor. The compounds in your leaves interact with the air, temperature and dampness and you disintegrate. Bits that remain of you get dragged into the ground and you start to nourish the soil, the worms and other life. The layers of leaves around you become a blanket as they rot down and nurture the fresh shoots preparing for spring and the cycle of growth after the deep, dark winter.

This is a reminder that we have no control and that in order to be nourished and nourish then we need to let go and go into the dark where amazing transformation can take place. We are at the brink of something dreadful but if we let go, move on from the doom our human nature can take us to the next level.

Maybe our environment will be completely different soon with no more nightingales to listen to in the dusk. But we will be working alongside and collaborating instead of trying to control. Could we use our magician minds to find solutions?

## **The Chthulucene**

We need to collaborate with these other 'persons' as Graham Harvey writes or as Donna Haraway says we need to 'make kin in the Chthulucene'. She says we need to work with the extraordinary possibilities this ecological plight brings us to.

'The Chthulucene is a productive call to action against the Anthropocene.' 'The Greek chthonios means "of, in, or under the earth and the seas" – a rich terran muddle... The chthonic ones are precisely not sky gods, not a foundation for the Olympiad, not friends to the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, and definitely not finished. The Earth bound can take heart – as well as action.' (Haraway, 2016:53)

In my eyes, the place of dying to something and letting go is a fruitful place of possibilities and the potential growth from this is positive. In Harraway's opinion, we have to let go of the anthropocentric views because they hold us in the outmoded systems that have got us into this mess.

I relate to the Cthulucene she speaks of because in my art and shamanic practice I interact with other beings in the dark, in other dimensions, in the Lower world, in the metaphorical leaf mould in order to find ways forward and this feels like a very creative place.

Tess Thackara's article (Thackara, 2017) investigates artists who explore the visionary components of Shamanism such as Saya Woolfalk, who describes herself as a hybrid and talks about her love for speculative fiction. Her artwork reminds me very much of Donna Harraways writing as she explores our futures.

'... the Chthulucene ... describes our epoch as one in which the human and non-human are inextricably linked in tentacular practices. The Chthulucene requires sym-poiesis, or making with, rather than auto-poiesis, or self-making'. (Harraway, 2016).

Saya Woolfalk's work has the look of Medicine wheels (cosmological maps) and the visionary paintings of ayahuasceros of the Amazon such as Pablo Amaringo where painter and plant have a healing engagement.

Saya Woolfalk's ongoing "Empathics" project (begun in 2009), for which she dreamed up a science-fictional community of hybrid, interspecies women who are like identity sponges, soaking up the cultures they're exposed to in both the physical and digital worlds, can perhaps be seen to represent both positive and negative forecasts for humanity.

'The basic answers to our survival might lie precisely in the very indigenous communities that the corporate global project is rapidly destroying.' (Thackara, 2017)

Woolfalk's Empathics present both a utopian picture of a deep and molecular form of empathy towards other people, and a dystopian counter-picture of corporate exploitation and cultural appropriation.

Many indigenous people including our own ancestors from this and other lands have said that we need to dream a different dream and imagine the future differently for the future of our planet and the human race. Saya Woolfalk's work holds this dreaming.

The word 'imagine' has its roots in the word to create, to embellish and the Imago is the final stage in an insects' life after metamorphosis. It's the time just after the butterfly emerges.

## **Embodiment.**

Artists whose work is infused with the DNA of our land and emotional environment is very inspiring to me. Combining the 'hybrid' that Woolfalk explores is something that is shaping my own work.

Anna Halprin is an American dancer and choreographer, now in her late nineties and still dancing and teaching. In the 1960's she initiated Planetary Dance which continues to be an annual global event. Hundreds of people gather together to dance outdoors with an intention for peace. Archival material from these Dance Circles in the Bay area have been at the Venice Biennale in the last few years and renewed attention has led to her work being exhibited in New York. 'Halprin has long espoused a philosophy of movement as a source of human intelligence.' (Thackara, 2017) "The body informs the mind," "experiences that go beyond words, that go beyond your conscious thinking but are part of you." She was diagnosed with cancer in 1972 and, aware of the healing and ritual element of dance, she started doing this for her own illness—and ultimately went into remission.' (Thackara, 2017)

Her passionate intention in continuing to bring people together in a ritual are very focused. In her book she writes 'In this urgent time, it is more important than ever that we use all the resources we have—whether they are artistic, political, service-oriented, or educational—to heal our families, our communities, our land, and ourselves. Being in Nature is vital to her and her planetary dance, which is a type of performance and ritual connects people to their own nature and the earth. The body is wise and in indigenous cultures there is no separation. The drawing and the dancing she did transformed her disease. She and the others who continue to dance in this way are allowing and surrendering to a wise creativity.

I am moved very much by how language, expression was influenced by the intimate co-existence of the Haida people with their natural surroundings. They are from the Northwest of the US on the Pacific coast.

Physicist F David Peat highlights in this quote to me how we ARE nature rather than just a part of nature. This is a big difference from our contemporary view of our place in nature and the world. For people like the Haida there is no separation between the natural sounds of their land and the sound of their language.

'To hear the Haida people (of the Northwest Pacific coast) speak is to listen to the sounds of waves on the shore and the cry of birds. Other languages carry the sounds of the winds; the sense of an overwhelming presence within the Eastern Woodlands; a dim memory of the slowly moving growl of a glacier from the last ice age; the sounds spoke to animals; the words whispered to the spirit world; the high pitched sounds sung softly by the Blackfoot as they ride at night so as not to frighten animals in their passing; and the vibrations that invoke the powerful energies of the cosmos.' (Peat, 1994:219)

Victor Greentree says 'The artist of the future will be a wizard, a magician, a shaman who will use any and all media to transform the consciousness of this planet.' (Berggren, 1998:75)

In my own lifetime I have seen the demise of nature around me. Birds and animals that were commonplace in my childhood garden are rarities now.

Farmers Isabella Tree and her husband handed their land, the Knepp estate, back to nature as a massive re-wilding project 17 years ago. As a result, biodiversity has increased dramatically. She says

‘Rewilding, giving nature the space and opportunity to express itself, is largely a leap of faith. It involves surrendering all preconceptions and simply sitting back and observing what happens.’ (Tree, 2018:9)

In the re-wilding of the ocean, whales in the Antarctic nearly at the point of extinction have also recovered. Whale hunting, which began in the western South Atlantic around 1830, caused the humpback population there to plummet to a low of 440 by 1958. With commercial whaling first curbed and then eventually banned in 1986, the population began to recover.’ Now there are close to 25,000 whales according to a BBC report. (Hernandez-Mares, 2019)

Maybe we have to really see what our world would look like at the brink before action is taken to make changes but when we loosen our grip on trying to control nature then balance ensues.

Maybe we need to become feral, the definition of which is ‘in a wild state, especially after escape from captivity or domestication.’ (Lexico,2020)

In his book *Feral*, George Monbiot says

‘But rewilding, unlike conservation, has no fixed objective: it is driven not by human management but by natural processes. There is no point at which it can be said to have arrived. Rewilding of the kind that interests me does not seek to control the natural world, to re-create a particular ecosystem or landscape, but – having brought back some of the missing species – to allow it to find its own way.’ (Monbiot, 2014:83)

Maybe this is what we have to do. I could suggest we become more feral as we escape the captivity of old mindsets.

## **Conclusion**

Creatives in all fields have the ability to help steer the ship of our hopes for our children through the storm of climate chaos. The artist can have the shaman-mind, the magical mind and the imago too to create new territories and I think the people best placed to be the psychopomp in this situation is the artist.

Stepping over the threshold could be uncomfortable but by being creative and ingenious with what we find there the dark, rich humus of the Chthulucene has growing potential. Collaboration with all ‘kin’ we find there is key.n

In this essay I conclude that we need to die to our current relationship to our world systems, to reconfigure our relations to the earth and its inhabitants in this time of climate chaos in order to live and thrive.

### **List of Illustrations**

Figure 1. Denes, A. (1982) *Wheatfield* [photo] At: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-agnes-deness-manhattan-wheatfield-grown-poignant> (Accessed on 10 January 2020).

Figure 2. Pieski, O. (2017) *Falling Shawls* [Photo] At: <http://www.outipieski.com/installations-collages/falling-shalws/> (Accessed on 10 January 2020).

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