

VOICES FROM THE BRECKS



POEMS FROM THE SANDLINES PROJECT

The poems in *Voices from the Brecks* celebrate in diverse ways the landscapes, birds, animals and human settlements that give Breckland its distinctive character. From the wistful solitude of woods sparkling with birdsong to the realism of burying the dead, these poems speak about life as it is and about where we find inspiration – often in nature, always in detail – when given time and occasion to write. *Voices from the Brecks* compiles the work of writers who took part in a series of Sandlines workshops during the spring and early summer of 2015. Within these pages they have captured some of the Breckland landscape and, more importantly, reflected the impact of that landscape on themselves. We have enjoyed working with them and we thank them for their contribution, and Breaking New Ground for its support for the project.

Melinda Appleby & Lois Williams

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INTRODUCTION

RICH IN BOTH nature and human culture, the Brecks hold many secrets. The area's long history of glacial sculpting, flint mining, rabbit warrening, devastating sand blows and extensive forestry plantations has created a very individual and evocative character. Blocks of conifers are interspersed with arable fields, large-scale pig and poultry farms, wide tracts of heathland and heavily protected military bases. Four rivers, conduits for the first people who came to explore and settle here, run through this dry and traditionally open landscape and connect many of the flint-built villages and market towns. Historically thinly populated, the Brecks remain as curious and as absorbing as when they were described by the first writers to come this way in the 17th century. That the area continues to inspire the written and spoken word is testament to its individuality and enduring power to fascinate.

James Parry, Vice-Chairman
Breaking New Ground

BRECKS

Eyes closed, I hear a bird like the ding of an elevator.
I spot another and think girl-sized-hammer. Is there
a man on the other side of the woods whistling?

No. It's enchantment in the form of bird. Gifts
in the ancient quietude. I strain to see the twisting horns
of highland cattle. Them, against the far wall of orderly trees,
tousled red heads bent nibbling swatches of green.

Us, silent on the winding river path, parted from the beasts
by hip high trees strung tight with tidy two-row barbed wire.
A fighter jet shrouds our earthly concerns with thunder.

—*Patricia Conkel*

B U Z Z A R D

Somewhere a buzzard calls
High up in the knotted pine
Grey skies promise rain
Quaking grass, shifting breeze

High up in the knotted pine
Whisper of feather, watchful eye
Quaking grass, shifting breeze
Beauty of a fearless creature

Whisper of feather, watchful eye
Quaking grass, shifting breeze
Beauty of a fearless creature
Somewhere a buzzard calls.

—*Ali Barnes*

WARREN

The dog runs between
two banks of gorse,
his tail a breezy pennant.
Nose down, on the scent,
rushing forward.

He stops, sniffs the air,
one paw raised. His tail drops
between his legs. He crouches,
whimpers, starts to shake. A low whine,
forced from drawn-back lips.

Slowly he backs away,
from the scent of blood,
from echoes of dying rabbits,
away from the old trapping bank.

—*Diane Jackman*

MIGRATION COUNTERPOINT

In my autumn I seek assurance in cyclic tokens of the spring:
blackthorn's first white blossom, siskins' restless gathering,
leaving for the warming North, supplanted by southern migrants.
These endless cycles ease my fear of journey's ending.

I try to cram each day with tasks, irrelevant peripherals,
stretching time that's left, checking for signs of senescence.
Do birds sense time's passage migrating above deserts, guided
through the featureless by the North's magnetic presence?

What power draws the crozier of each fern's new uncurling,
poised, a green flexing my elderly joints can only envy?
The swoop shriek of returning swifts, like circling kids on bikes,
teases me that simple joy is now in very short supply.

—*Ivor Murrell*

HOMING

(After Ira Sadoff)

This is the first time I leave the house without you,
the day the apple blossom startles pink and white,
flailing wet in my face. Unseen in the hedgerow
a blackbird calls perpetual alarm. A passing shower
sprinkles my empty hands; I've come out
heedless of gloves and hat, with no last minute
turning back for a strewn sock. I am coatless,
careless, light and full-limbed. The sun breaks through
and I slide the grass to the bottom of the hill,
arms outstretched. Maybe just time now
to see if starlings have returned to the barn?
Lean my cheek into the powdery wall, and hear
the squabbling scabble in the roof space,
the piping of insistent diamond mouths,
sending me back up the hill at a misgiving jog-trot.
Here, here! they cry. Here!

—*Elaine Ewart*

SANTON DOWNHAM CHURCHYARD

The church buries its dead
in Breckland sand.

Frederick, Sarah,
seven of their children,
names from the past
at rest forever.

George, pioneer
in Central Africa
two hundred years ago.

Hannah, Sofia,
wife, daughter –
keepers of the home.

Sacred is their memory –
the writing fades,
yellowed by lichen,
obscured by creeping grass.
A cross stands,
carved ivy twisted round.
An angel watching over
a lonely headstone.

The church, a haven,
welcomes the newly departed,
a mother cradling her new born.

—*Sue Wallace-Shaddad*

THATCH

Gone its purple gleaned from sandy heath,
gone heather's fragrance, merely dry,
taut to touch, a fleeting crackle.

Roots twined skyward,
flowers now black, earth facing,
a shelter for all from rain, wind, sun.

A well-serving roof,
Anglo Saxon thatch.

—*Kaaren Whitney*

THE WALLED GARDEN

The scent of lavender
mingles with the honeysuckle
draping the Brecks stone wall.
Honeysuckle and stones
shielding us from the world.

—*Trish Rissen*

IN THE NUNNERY GARDEN

Drink honeybee!
Not soberly,

plunge into wild geranium
no Dior but outdoor opium.

Sip the scented wisteria
blossom, all purple perfumery.

Sup sweet mockorange,
and rosemary awash with rain.

Quiver at the cusp
of the white nettle flowers.

Drunk honeybee – zig-
zag home to your hive,

a chimney stacked beneath
the chestnut's springing boughs.

—*Deborah Bowkis*

THOUGHTS ON SANTON DOWNHAM
CHURCHYARD

Stone under the mason's hand
Becomes a tree, a flower, a vine,
An angel, or an archway.
When he's done with his commissions,
He'll turn his thoughts to Jack in the bar
Or Tom at the plough, or Meg with the cow,
And carve a gargoyle for the church.

—*Rosemary Jones*

GRAVESTONES AT SANTON DOWNHAM

The smell of new mown grass assaults the nose
with a neatness like gin.

Quietly leaning tombstones
tell of peace, perfect peace.

One says “Memories of love and laughter”

Mine are buried deep, deep
as the old bones lying here.

No-one dead, I notice,
is a right bastard.

There is a stone
that says he was a loving husband.

Underneath
this accolade,
the stone
says nothing

except the name
of his dead wife.

—*Florence Cox*

THE BRECKS

A delightful place
From upright shafts of Thetford pines
To inland dunes of shifting sand.

A unique landscape shaped
By time, by man.

—*Vanda Richards*

STANTA – ON EXERCISE

One hot afternoon, needing water,
we slipped out of the compound
behind the souk, into the tunnel,
away, beneath the snipers' fire.
Sound diminished, sand walls shimmered,
a wagtail snapped at flies.
We crawled, pine belts ahead,
dust flicked round us, lizards
basking in sun, inches became feet,
somewhere a buzzard mewed.
Resin and gorse scented the air
breezing over the rotting smells
fused in the hubbub behind.
How long would we have, out here,
fearing explosion, nervous of capture?
Blistering heath, hazed by sun, stretched
away beyond the snipers' guns.
How long before Breckland sand gave way
to heat and Afghan dust.

—*Melinda Appleby*

BRECKLAND BROOM

A cobweb nestles in a brush of broom
Holding brush bristles tight
Tight as strands of silvered rain
Whose bright beads rest on taut spun strings
To catch the light.
Besom branches bend below
Heavy with velvet black seed pods
Soft and smooth to touch
Lined neat in rows.

They are all that remain
Of sweet fleeting scents of citrus flowers
On light breezes of early summer.
Brush branches now bow to the passing year
Sweeping sand as the spider makes the broom his home.

—*Sandra Walmsley*

RIVER LARK AT WEST STOW

I walk against the river's flow,
stick my hand in, warm as an animal.
Does it love me as much as I love it?
My hand begins where the river ends.

Stick my hand in, warm as an animal.
Welcome myself to a new day.
My hand begins where the river ends.
Morning starts while I hold my breath.

Welcome myself to a new day.
Does it love me as much as I love it?
Morning starts while I hold my breath.
I walk against the river's edge.

—*Nancy Krygowski*

A HEALING AT THE LITTLE OUSE

Stuck for words I walk the bank,
river water at my side.

Nettle, sedge, forget-me-not.
Spinweed eddies. Swans arrive

bringing nothing but white light.
I let it in. Far inside

silted with worry, the boat of a thought
unropes then slides.

—*Lois Williams*

WERE THE ANGLO-SAXONS HAPPY?

Were the Anglo-Saxons happy?
Did they laugh and joke and play?
Did the things that make me smile
tickle them in the same way?

Was their life a constant struggle
simply living day to day?
Or has swift progress through the ages
meant that we have lost our way?

I hope this sleepy village
(river, trees and wide-green land),
was once alive with joyful voices,
the kind that we still understand.

—*Holly Isted*

A HOVERFLY HAS A WASH AND BRUSH UP
ON THE HONEYSUCKLE AT BRANDON
WALLED GARDEN

Clean

Clean

Clean

Check the back

Check the front

Pause

Preen

Preen

Preen

Ponder

That will do

Time to go!

—*Theresa Mason*

THE TALLEST TREE IN THE BRECKS

Together with my mates
huddling, touching, crowding
every part of our upper bodies
economising the catching of light

Tall we are

We stand alone
at a respective distance
in the soft dark ground
Creatures come up
Threats invade
A web of arms
suffocating, competing, selfish
wanting part of our cosiness above

A human hand rescues,
hacking away the threat

A relief

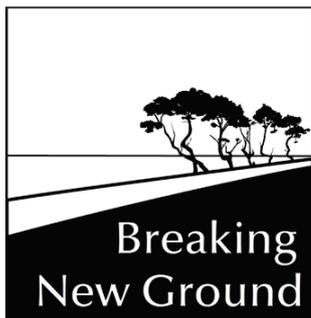
A mark remains,
reminder of competition,
a hold on the past

But above

I am together with my mates
huddling, touching, crowding
every part of our upper bodies

—*Britta Lipper*

Writers Melinda Appleby and Lois Williams created Sandlines to help people discover the rich cultural and natural heritage of the Brecks. Working with the Brecklands Landscape Partnership, Sandlines invites local residents and visitors to write creatively and build community in small, day-long workshops, under the inspiring guidance of a poet and a conservationist. Blending poetry with the craft of reading the landscape, Sandlines workshops explore the visible and the hidden histories that make the Brecks a uniquely special place.



The Sandlines Project is part of the Breaking New Ground Landscape Partnership Scheme, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Breaking New Ground aims to tell the story of the Brecks and reconnect communities to the landscape.