

After London by Maeve Henry

It was the quiet that saved us. The
whisper of grasses, self-seeded,
defying the curfew. Sea-grasses
greening the shallow coastal waters,
meadow grasses spilling out of the
park into the pavements. Some days
the hum of bees seemed to drown
the flower drenched verges. At night
the silence was pierced by owls and
foxes. Hedgehogs mated in the roads
where cars were rusting. The only
visitors to the broken high street
were fallow deer, tripping quietly.
We hid indoors as instructed,
waiting for nature to reset, waiting
for the anger against us to subside.
We listened to the blame on the
internet and said our prayers.
We only came out when some of us
were dead and all of us were famishing.
We only came out after the night
when there was no news, just a repeat
of yesterday's. We knew then they had
gone, our leaders. We did not care where;

they had been no good for us. We came out
and stood in groups, pale in the sunshine.
There was no one to tell us what to do.

It was the strangers who carried quiet inside
them that saved us. The ones we had always
resented, who had lost their own cities already.

The man who hauled his sewing machine
across Europe, swimming rivers and ducking
under barbed wire. The girl whose mother
taught her how to bottle pears in a ruined cellar.

The boy who crossed the desert, who could
fix any machine you gave him. They showed
us what to do as London broke up into a
hundred villages, the length of a day's walk.