

Rainbow wreath by Mary Jo Hoffman
stillblog.net

Meadow sweet

Peter Reason finds love
in the Anthropocene

On a sunny afternoon in early September, I sit in the orchard meadow next to a clump of late-flowering marjoram. It is covered in bees – honeybees from the nearby hives, and two kinds of bumblebee – crawling over the flower heads, burrowing in for nectar, and getting smothered in grains of pollen as they do so. Butterflies – a gatekeeper, a small white, and a common blue – flutter delicately between the flower clusters.

Straggling through the marjoram are strands of vetch, with taller knapweed behind, all wild flowers that blossom as summer draws to a close, a finale to a changing palette of colours. As winter fades, cowslips show up in sheltered spots; by April their canary yellow covers the meadow, with the penetrating blue of grape hyacinth as counterpoint. June is predominantly white and yellow – ox-eye daisies grow knee-high, threaded through with yellow rattle and golden dashes of bird's-foot trefoil. By late July, now in parts thigh-high, the colour moves to the purple end of the spectrum: marjoram – pink and deep red; vetch – lilac; knapweed – dark purple.

Reflecting back over the year, I also look forward: in a few weeks' time, as these last flowers fade, the grasses will turn to shades of straw. It will be time to sharpen my scythe, cut the summer's growth and cart it away for the horses in the nearby stables. In autumn I will mow it a couple of times, so tall grasses don't overwhelm the low spring flowers. This is a cycle

of growth and fading that has persisted since time immemorial, a relationship between human and meadow grass that I participate in with enormous pleasure. It is a blessing.

We humans evolved in a living world of growth, fading, death and rebirth. We love that which is fragile, that which dies and so makes space for new life. As philosopher Martin Hägglund writes, "my devotion to the ones I love is inseparable from the sense that they cannot be taken for granted... Our time together is illuminated by the sense that it will not last forever and we need to take care of one another because our lives are fragile." And so, I love both the blossoming and the fading of the flowers of the meadow, just as I love the brightness of high summer equally with the deep darkness of winter.

Life is lovable *because* it is fragile. We have all relearned this lesson during the coronavirus pandemic. But in these times of ecological catastrophe, which some call the Anthropocene, we know, if we are brave enough to face up to it, that the fragility that makes life so precious is *itself* in danger. We are witnessing not just the end of particular lives, not just the extinction of species, but also *permanent* endings of patterns of being, disruptions of the process of life itself. If we are brave enough, we know too that this may include our descendants and our own family lines; humanity itself; possibly even life on Earth, and Gaia as a living being.

How do we continue to love in the face of such profound loss, of loss of loss, when the fragility of the summer flowers is no longer with us? People save what they love. Are modern humans capable of loving, and so caring for, the animals and plants that are disappearing in the growing cascade of extinctions? Can our love encompass the cycles of life that sustain the planet as a whole? R

Peter Reason is a writer and teacher. His book *In Search of Grace: An Ecological Pilgrimage* is published by Earth Books.