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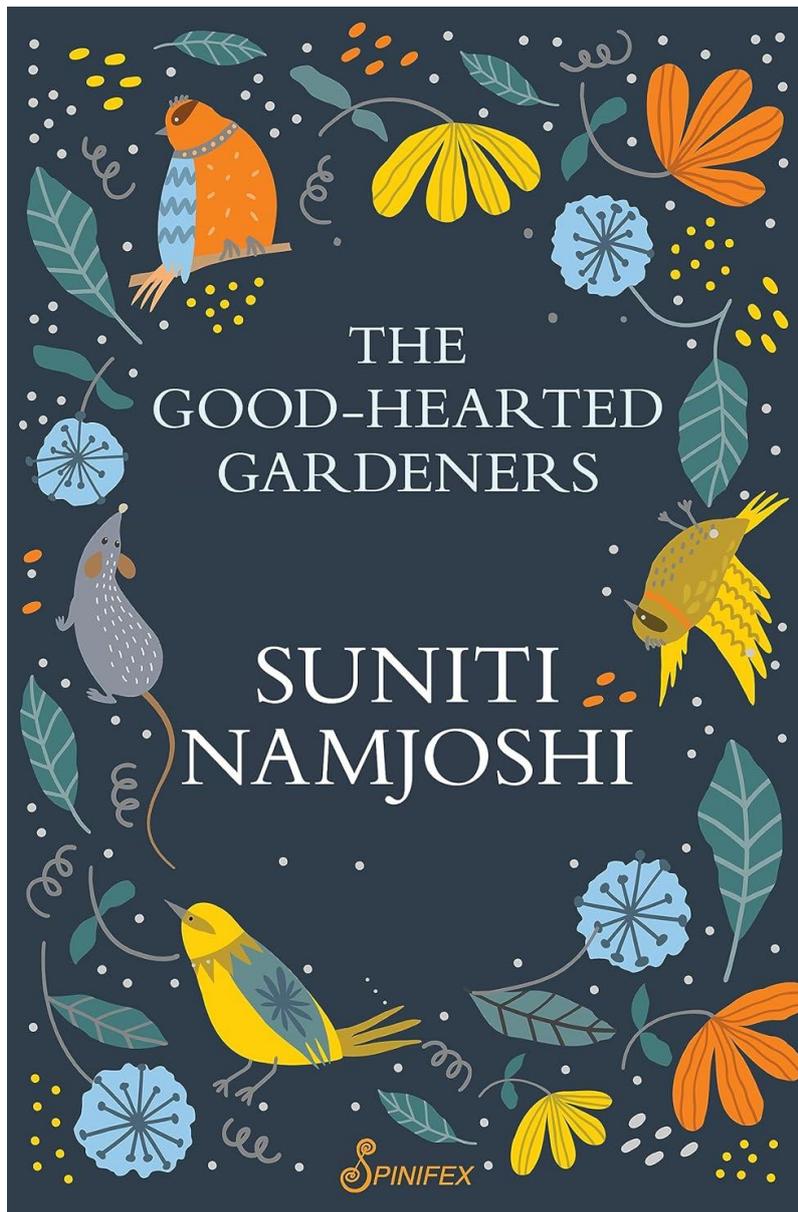
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**BIRDS TALK BACK**

**Kaori and Suniti in Conversation**

**March 2025**



Cover Design by Deb Snibson

**KN:** Dear Suniti, it is so kind of you to respond to my message. As I explained, I am an animal studies scholar, who is currently leading an AHRC-funded project called [‘Rethinking Fables in the Age of the Environmental Crisis’](#), the aim of which is to take innovative approaches to the fable genre to explore our relationship with the nonhuman



stories for human benefits, firstly because fable animals are by nature metaphorical or allegorical, each animal standing in for some human value. Also, fables are thought to anthropomorphise, categorise (or 'cage') and silence real animals, and by doing so, empower humans as the fabulist who speaks for them, as your poem beautifully illustrates. This is why Animal Studies scholars were once very suspicious of the fable genre, and we were trained to 'avoid fables' (Derrida, p.37). But recently, more and more scholars are paying attention to the fable for its power to fabulate and engage the nonhuman: it is a potent medium to explore and imagine alternative worlds and relationships with other species and more-than-human entities. Our 'Rethinking Fables' project aims to network these people. Yes, I agree that 'even good-hearted fabulists exploit animals', but I was taken by your fables precisely because you are acutely aware of this exploitation. In your poem, I love the way the animals just 'stand and look' as the fabulist commands them through her storytelling. And, in your books, I spotted many instances in which you let your talking animals interrupt and question the narrator's motives, which makes your fables ethically and philosophically interesting and thought-provoking.

**SN:** I was charmed by the illustrations you have used in your project web pages. The lion reminded me of my fable from *Feminist Fables* (*Spinifex* p 97).



*Kelileh va Demneh*. Wikipedia Public domain

## THE MOUSE AND THE LION

One day, a lion caught a mouse. 'Spare me,' said the mouse, 'I am so little and you are so big; but, who knows, perhaps someday I will be able to do you a favour.' The lion thought this funny and let the mouse go. But a few days later the very same lion was caught in a net. After a while the mouse came along. 'Help,' called the lion, 'Help, little mouse. Chew through these ropes. Remember, after all, that you owe me a favour.' The mouse started chewing and then suddenly stopped. 'Why have you stopped?' roared the lion. 'Well, I just thought of something,' said the little mouse, 'You see, I think I have already done you a favour.' 'You haven't,' roared the lion. 'Yes, I have,' said the mouse. 'What?' roared the lion. 'Well, you see,' said the mouse, 'I haven't killed you.'

**KN:** This is such a fascinating rewriting of Aesop's fable commonly known as 'The Lion and the Mouse', a variant of which is also in *The Panchatantra*. (Did you deliberately swap the order of the species in the title, though in this particular illustration the little creature is a jackal?) In the original version of the fable, the mouse obligingly rescues the lion – and is probably eaten by the same lion a few months later.

**SN:** Sometimes a fable makes clear how power works. In this one I'm saying that the rules the powerful lay down are unacceptable. A central feminist concern is the unequal relation between the powerful and the relatively powerless, and, of course, that applies to our relationship with our fellow creatures.

Now that we are in danger of destroying other species as well as ourselves, these questions matter more than ever. My partner, Gillian Hanscombe, once wrote a poem (which she has now misplaced) in which the animals talked back. That's what inspired *The Good-Hearted Gardeners*. The birds talk back as do the others animals – in English when it suits them. Here's what Madame Emma (the barn owl) has to say when it becomes absolutely necessary to take action:

*Stage One: Passive Resistance*

*Pigs to go on hunger strike.*

*Horses to refuse to race, cats to stop purring and dogs to consistently disobey orders.*

*Sheep and goats to wander where they like.*

...

*The Next Stage: Proactive Measures*

*Birds to shit on people and on motor cars whenever possible.*

*Whales to overturn fishing trawlers.*

*Rats and mice to chew through cables.*

*And large herd animals to stampede through the countryside and destroy whatever impedes their progress.*

***The Good-Hearted Gardeners*** (Spinifex, pp 66-67)

In your book, *[Imperial Beast Fables: Animals, Cosmopolitanism, and the British Empire](#)*, you must have come across the problem of relative power. Perhaps especially with regard to Kipling? (Being a native myself, I can't stand his attitude to natives.)

**KN:** Oh, dear, Suniti. You've spotted that I am a Kipling scholar. I totally agree with you that his representations of Indian people are hugely problematic. Being one yourself, you must feel this very strongly, and in no way do I endorse his imperial and race politics. But Kipling I think is an interesting writer, and I learned so much about the fable genre through his work. In particular, the *Jungle Books* fascinate me. The books are usually read as an allegory of the British Empire, in which Mowgli the wolf-boy, standing in for the white coloniser, bosses around different animals in the jungle, representing various peoples of India. However, I decided to read the *Jungle Books* as a fable of the Empire — one that gives voice to the animals whose lives became entangled in the British imperial network. Kipling was an animal lover, and many of the stories in the *Jungle Books* are based on his own experience in India. Indeed, Suniti, there are some similarities between you and Kipling as fabulists...

**SN:** Eeek!

**KN:** Well, just as your Suki appears in your stories, Kipling includes his dog Vixen in one of his *Jungle Books* stories. Like you, he was born in Mumbai (then Bombay) and grew up absorbing Indian stories told by his ayah and others — a storytelling tradition he drew upon in writing the *Jungle Books*. But the similarity ends there. While Kipling used his animal stories to celebrate the workings of the British Empire, appropriating the Indian tradition, your fables resist and write against it and its enduring legacy.

**SN:** Kaori, you have horrified me! I suppose it's salutary for me to realise that one has things in common even with those one considers inimical. 😊

**KN:** I am sorry for the comparison, Suniti, but I think this makes your fables even more important as a decolonising gesture, as Europeans such as Kipling appropriated non-Western fable traditions to tell their stories, and fables were eminently collectible. My book, *The Imperial Beast Fables* offers a 'deconstructive' take on the *Jungle Books*. I explored some of the elements in the books which I think are essential to the fable genre – metaphor/analogy, animal language, migration (fables globally travel), the fabulist as a piper, around whom animals gather together, etc., to talk about a variety of animal texts. And talking of passive/active resistance, I tried to highlight instances in which animal agency can be seen to disrupt the working of the Empire: for instance, seafaring rats, chewing and gnawing in the Empire as an imperial Ark – much in the same spirit as the animals in *The Good-Hearted Gardeners* 'talk back' and offer resistance; and the book was inspired by the two fancy rats (lovely and mischievous) I had as companions.

**SN:** Fancy rats? You amaze me!

You say that the fable is an important form for addressing the crisis in the world today. It's a didactic form – it makes a point usually and is related to satire and allegory. But do some fables lose their power when the context changes? Or is human nature so intractable that our problems, in one form or another, always remain with us? And is it possible to write a good fable if one doesn't actually agree about the point being made? As an experiment I tried writing a couple of fables making fun of climate change activists. But the first about Johnny Head in Air, who fell into a ditch because he was too busy thinking about what might happen rather than what was happening, wasn't worthwhile. And the Chicken Little attempt went into reverse gear and turned into a satire against those who refuse to take climate change seriously.

## **NO WORRIES**

And when Chicken Little ran about screeching, "The planet's in danger, the world's in danger, various species are in extreme danger!" people were tolerant. "Don't you worry, little one," they told her kindly. "We will help you pick up the pieces, when the sun sizzles and sky tumbles down."

The trouble is the planet really is in danger. The effect of juxtaposing two different points of view depends on the writer's sense of what is true and what delusory; but it also depends on the reader's view. A reader who believed that there really wasn't much of a problem would find the fable pointless. And should a miracle happen and the planet cease to be in danger, would the fable be at all relevant?

I then tried a King Log story. Though the British Empire has been apologising for its sins, other powers have now started up on attempts at global expansion. Here's **King Zog**:

The frogs were tired of King Log. He did nothing at all and tended to doze off at the drop of a hat. Zog was the answer. Zog would do something, take care of everything and of everyone. As soon as he was chosen, Zog went into action. He and his henchmen rounded up the frogs, and Zog chomped steadily until he had swallowed the last tiny tadpole. Then he belched. "There," he said, "Problems solved and promises kept. I am magnificent."

It's not very different from Aesop's version and to my mind seems particularly relevant at the moment. Would it be less so in a different world, or will megalomaniacs always be with us? Do you remember the source of the original story?

**KN:** I am not sure where Aesop's King Log fable originally comes from, but these fables, written in response to the current global crisis, are truly fantastic. This makes me think, where do fables, and *your* fables, come from? Could you describe the process of writing fables for you? When you write a fable, where would you start, or what kind of things prompt you to start writing one? How quickly do you write one? Do you have any writing tips for anyone who wants to write a fable? And how would you define a fable?

**SN:** Fables can be offshoots of other fables – derived from ‘monuments of unageing intellect’ and also from ‘the rag and bone shop of the heart’ as Yeats said. Like lyric poems fables are highly concentrated and short. If the elements of a poem are sound, sense and imagery, then it seems to me that a fabulist is someone who can conjure a powerful image (often an animal) and who has a strong sense of the absurd and can juxtapose a sensible view with a deluded one. Sound also matters. The traditional syntax of storytelling can drive the direction and conclusion of the narrative.

I can’t write a poem or a fable to order – it’s dependent on the chance of all these elements coming together to make a pattern. Sometimes a poem or a fable arrives half formed and has to be worked at. It’s also a matter of practice and daily exercise even though weeks might go by with nothing to show for the time and work put in. Trying to write a good fable is like trying to do anything well, I suppose – needs practice and patience.

Here are some examples of where fables start, though I’m afraid this will only demonstrate how hit and miss the process is. *The Mouse and the Lion* was inspired by a phrase someone once uttered and which stayed in my memory: ‘Oh you are so beeg, Mr XY and I am so leettle, would you please do me a favour?’ *No Worries* was an attempt to write an anti-environmentalist fable. And the other day Gill, my partner, told me she had heard a slot on the radio [news about a bald eagle attacking a Canada goose eight times](#) and finally giving up and how all the Canadians had cheered.

The next day Gill told me that the naturalist who filmed the encounter said that three things about it were very unusual: 1. Bald eagles don’t usually attack Canada geese. 2) A bald eagle would not normally persist in such an attack. 3) A Canada goose wouldn’t normally withstand such an attack. I found myself smiling as Gill told me this. Is it a fable only because of what is going on at present? Would it be a fable anyway with a moral that said: ‘Might isn’t right and doesn’t always win’?

**KN:** This story of the Bald Eagle and the Canada Goose is amazing and simply too good to be true – but it certainly feels like the beginning of a fable. This is another example of how real animals prompt us to engage with the fable genre. No matter how misleading and anthropomorphic these fables might be, they show how people turn to nature in moments of personal or national crisis, to find hope and courage to persevere. But the problem is that this ‘nature’ is becoming more and more fragile, and therefore less able to host our stories. Is there any particular fable you think speaks to the current global and environmental crisis?

**SN:** The Story of King Log and King Stork? Or a variation on the story of the fox and the goat in a well? For example:

## **ALAS, POOR MONKEY**

Five monkeys, who were whooping it up in the middle of the night, fell into a well. The well was dry, but they were bruised and frightened. They began to blame each other.

‘You led us into this!’ they shouted at the monkey who had fallen in first.

‘You had the torch. If you had pointed it at the ground instead of at the sky, this wouldn’t have happened. And anyway, when you saw me fall, you shouldn’t have followed,’ retorted the first monkey.

And so it went on. By the second day they were hungry and thirsty. They realized they had a problem. They used up that day arguing about the nature of the well, why it had it appeared, and whether it had always been there.

By the third day they understood they had a serious problem. They spent that day arguing about the best solution.

And on the fourth day they agreed on a solution they thought would work. They estimated the depth of the well. They carefully calculated the height of each monkey. And they concluded that if they stood on each other’s shoulders, the monkey on top would be able to leap out and fetch a rope.

This time they argued about who would be on top and who at the bottom. They argued so endlessly that the rains came, and they all drowned.’

***Matriarchs, Cows and Epic Villains*** (Zubaan, Penguin India p 281)

Clearly, this is a reflection on us, not on monkeys. Do you really think it would make a difference if the animals could speak?

**KN:** I cannot agree more with the narrator’s statement in ***The Good-hearted Gardeners*** that ‘Once it’s realised that birds and beasts have speech, the whole notion of who is writing for whom shifts’.

One of the book’s characters intriguingly mentions a project which ‘involves teaching English to wildlife ... so they may participate in the affairs of men’. I found this intriguing – I believe it must be a reference to colonial history and global English hegemony – but it also addresses the relationship between language and wildlife. Do you have any thoughts on this? How can we use language to ethically teach, or rather be taught by, wildlife?

**SN:** ***The Good-Hearted Gardeners*** is a fantasy. The birds and the beasts decide to speak to us because we have put them in grave danger. They need to make common cause with the more sensible human beings in order to avert the common danger. If it were not for that, I’m not sure they would want to speak to us even if they could. Birds and beasts do speak – often with body language and with various sounds. And when it suits us we ignore them. I expect cats and dogs in particular understand quite a few

human words and probably understand more of what we have to say than we understand about what they have to say. There are clear parallels between colonial attitudes and our treatment of other species.

As I've said in ***The Good-Hearted Gardeners***, nothing colonises the brain as thoroughly as language. Being able to communicate with the birds and beasts might be a good idea provided we don't try to 'colonise' them. What's required in my view is a radical shift in our thinking. We are not the 'lords' of the universe and do not have the right to try to shove pieces of it around or to dominate others. Except for the Australian first nations, we seem to think that 'civilisation' has to do with 'humanising' our surroundings. This tends to turn into the notions that 'might is right' and 'we know best'. Many fables question the glorious smugness of prevailing attitudes. I like to think that fabulists always stand up for the underdog, but that may be wishful thinking ...

**KN:** I totally agree. What really scares me is that animals are indeed talking in English – or one of the dominant world languages – to tell their stories (and through them, ours), whereas interspecies relationships should be a journey of translation, trial and error, taking into account countless forms in which 'speech' and interspecies conversations should take place. I'd love the fable to be the space of such experimentation – and in this sense, your call to 'liquefy' English in ***The Good-Hearted Gardeners*** truly appeals to me. I also love your word choice 'liquefy', turning language into liquid — to water the garden, and thereby nurture the beasts and birds living in it. Such a watery approach might even be able to transform our land-based thinking to help out endangered creatures in the rivers and oceans.



'The Birds Try to Beat Down the Ocean', *Panchatantra*. Wikipedia Public domain

But, I am aware that such a view is too utopian, or 'wishful thinking', as our desire to reach out to other species itself might as well be 'colonising'. Indeed, I have also wondered about whether fables are always written by and for the underdog. Many of the fables are 'state fables' – seemingly written to justify the status quo, such as in the case of the ***Jungle Books*** (the British Empire) and ***Uncle Remus*** (the post-Civil War Southern American society). But even in that case, the fables shed light on the working of the power which oppresses the underdog? The genre has a long tradition of speaking to



There's something I wanted to ask you. I so liked the Japanese images on the project [web site](#) that I looked them up. I'm not sure which La Fontaine fables they illustrate. I want to try to write a fable based on the original story and on the image to see whether the delicacy of the image affects what I write.

**KN:** I am glad that you liked it. It is an illustration of La Fontaine's 'The Frog and the Rat' by the Japanese painter Kanō Tomonobu (1843-1912). It is taken from a book called ***Choix de fables de La Fontaine*** (1894) edited by Pierre Barboutau, and illustrated by three Japanese artists. Though the book (in two volumes) was published in Japan, it was in French and was intended to showcase Japanese artistic styles to foreigners. I wanted to choose an image which shows the global and intercultural nature of the fable genre, and I thought this was perfect. This is the full image:



Kanō Tomonobu, 'The Frog and the Rat' in *Choix de fables de La Fontaine* (1894).  
Wikipedia Public domain

**SN:** I tried to write a fable, but what happened wasn't quite what I intended – perhaps the result of the news battering us daily.

## A FABLE FOR OUR TIMES

One day when a cloud had descended into the valley and a fine mist covered the lake, a frog and a rat, who had seen each other by the lakeside over the years, decided to be friends. “We won’t make the mistake the fox and stork made. We know that we are alike and that we’re different.”

“Absolutely,” agreed the frog. “I live in the water. If you visited, you would probably drown. We’ll have to be careful.”

“And I live on the land and burrow in the earth. If you visited, you wouldn’t be comfortable,” the rat replied.

As they chatted, a kite sitting on a tree nearby overheard them. “And I live in the air,” she interrupted. “I could tell you such tales. Can I be a friend too?”

She glided closer. She expected to be welcomed. She was, after all, queen of the skies. But the frog slid halfway into the water, and the rat backed into a hole.

“We’ll think about it,” muttered the rat.

The frog was more tactful. “That is so kind. But you, who have flown far and wide and seen so much, would not be interested in our humble concerns.”

“I could talk, and you could listen,” retorted the kite.

“Friendships aren’t one-sided,” protested the rat.

“Why don’t you want to be my friends? I’m not stupid. I can see you’re reluctant!” the kite screeched.

“It’s because you might eat us. And you’re bossy,” the rat blurted out.

“I am not bossy. And I rarely eat my friends,” the kite informed them. She was getting more and more annoyed. “But if you’re not nice to me, I could eat you!”

“In that case,” said the frog as nicely as possible, “it would be a great honour to make an alliance,” which made the kite preen, and the rat scowl.

**KN:** Oh, wow. It’s amazing to see how you animate the illustration to create a different fable. It is a fitting one for our project, as the fable starts interestingly with the Frog and the Rat’s attempt to rethink and rewrite their story – though they yield to the bullying kite, not dissimilarly to the original version of the fable. May I ask what the moral of this fable is, if any?

**SN:** Oh, come now, it reflects on the present upheaval in world politics. More generally it says what so many fabulists have said before me: ‘Be careful how you deal with the powerful’ – as in the story of the monkey and the crocodile. Goja, who looked after me when I was little, used to tell me that story. The image occurs again and again in my work though I didn’t realise until years later that the story is from ***The Panchatantra***.

Fables seem to call for illustration. This isn’t true of poems (with the exception of Blake) and an illustration might often do disservice to a poem.

**KN:** I've also wondered why fables always generate illustrations and the other way about. Even when there is no illustration, we tend to have a mental image of animal characters when we hear a fable. So, in a sense, the fable is always illustrated, and if so, how does this feature influence the telling of the story (wildlife documentaries always have a feel of a fable).

**SN:** A wildlife documentary about grey fur seals that I watched did result in a poem, though not in quite the way the documentary makers would have liked. It's called *The Fur Seals as Shown on Television*, ***The Fabulous Feminist***, pp 47, 48. It describes what's shown in the documentary – the relatively huge male battering the females in order to mate and ends with the lines:

The TV announcer  
is very excited.  
I feel bruised. My head  
hurts.

Even in a 'found' fable the meaning depends on the perceiver. We are fascinated by our fellow creatures – even children, especially children. And then we position ourselves in relation to other animals, make analogies and sometimes decree what follows (though it does not necessarily follow at all). This thought process is the seed from which a fable can germinate. We do not have to think that the alpha male is a fact of life, or that when lions are around, the lamb is inevitably going to be eaten, or that evolution has resulted in our 'superiority to all other species' and that we are therefore entitled to certain privileges. ***Non-professional fabulists also make up incipient fables***; just as people who would not call themselves poets engage in metaphors in daily life – often unconsciously. Looked at in this way, I understand better what you mean by '*the importance of the fable as that which responds to, and help us make sense of, what is happening in this world which we share with a multitude of other creatures.*' It also makes clearer to me why those who are not primarily fabulists are engaged in dealing with topics such as communication with animals, human-animal relationships, and the kinds of fables that are generated in different contexts... We are concerned with aspects of the same process. And perhaps when we look at ourselves and our fellow creatures, we will see that the vision of 'nature red in tooth and claw' can be ameliorated, even altered.

**KN:** It is interesting that you here make a distinction between fables and poetry: fables are often more visual. This reminds me of an interesting conversation in ***Suki***, where the cat reflects on the nature of these two genres: human and feline fables differ significantly, as humans and cats have a very different sense of justice and morality, but 'the poems would probably be the same', as 'poems are about time ... and about living and dying'. Do you have any further comments on this – and what do you make of the fact that some fabulists write in poetry (like La Fontaine)?

**SN:** I think some fabulists use verse because they are good at it. If I could do heroic couplets as skilfully as Pope, I would. About poems and fables – I'm not sure about this – I think lyric poems concentrate on what it is like to be ephemeral creatures who live in time, are immersed in it, are in a sense made up of it. Fables, I think are more concerned with our relationship with other living creatures. Perhaps we should substitute 'living creature' for 'human', but it would take time for it to work in English.

**KN:** Talking of time, I love the moment in which Suki, asked about what she's really interested in, answers 'Galactic Life'. I recently watched the [news about a pod of dolphins](#) circling a capsule containing NASA astronauts which had landed in the sea. If poetry is about the creaturely life we share with nonhuman species, I wondered if fables can be something galactic and planetary, as they deal with species and nonhuman forces which we are part of and which are yet beyond us? (Just a thought.)

**SN:** I think you're entering the realms of mythology/ theology? And science fiction? 😊  
In part it depends on how we are willing to read fables, doesn't it? And how willing to acknowledge that other creatures too are like us – and unlike us?

**KN:** Yes, I think there is much affinity between the fable and science fiction, in that it is a speculative piece about other species. And the fable is certainly part of *SF* in Donna Haraway's sense – Speculative Feminisms and Speculative Fabulations – of which you are such an accomplished practitioner. I take speculative fabulation to mean multispecies, collaborative modes of thinking and storytelling to imagine ways of flourishing together; this is very difficult but necessary for us on this precarious planet. Haraway interestingly includes in her list of *SF* words 'String Figures', shapes and patterns made in the game of cat's-cradle. The game is fun but needs collaboration and attention, trial and error — 'dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn't there before, of relaying connections that matter' (Haraway, p. 10). It is interesting to think that telling and retelling fables is like the game of string figures, which is all about 'giving and receiving patters' (p. 10), which we play with fabulists from the past and the future, human and nonhuman.

Talking of *SF*, I had such pleasure in reading your unpublished novel ***Ousel***, which features an AI bird poet. This character actually reminded me of a mechanical bird appearing in ***Suki***, who also composes a poem. But the contexts in which these birds appear feel very different; If the former characterises fabular characters as animal-machines, conjured up to enrich our lives, the latter explores our new existence inseparably wound up in AI technology? Do you have any thoughts about this as well as the advent of AI technology? What kind of new fables might emerge in response to our new and emerging relationship with AI technology?

**SN:** The birds in *Suki* have to do with the operations of the mind which one becomes aware of as one tries to meditate. The point about Ousel is that the little blackbird is metallic, but not mechanical. It learns. AI are evolving. Will our relationship be symbiotic or adversarial or both? I have not used AI in my own work so far, unless using search engines counts. I do not know what sort of creatures AI might become. And if and when they write their poems, I do not know whether I will be their ideal reader.

Kaori Nagai  
Suniti Namjoshi

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**Suniti Namjoshi** is a fabulist, a poet, a satirist and a feminist. She was born in Mumbai, India and lives in the southwest of England. 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.*

**Kaori Nagai** is a Senior Lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Kent and the Principal Investigator of [‘Rethinking Fables in the Age of the Environmental Crisis’](#).



Edward Lear, 'Barnard's Parakeet', Courtesy of GetArchive LLC