

Nature Notes

APRIL 26, 2020

BY NICOLA CHESTER

The Green Fuse.



With what Dylan Thomas called 'the force that through the green fuse drives the flower', Spring advances anyway. Two swallows zip through the farmyard and are gone, to some remembered beacon further north, snipping up the air as they go. A small dust-devil whips-up behind them, as if, for all the world, they caused it. A narrow, spinning vortex of dust, grit-in-the-eye, chaff and a weathered crisp-packet, whirls up and then dissipates into a hiss, and absolute silence.



I descend the hard set-ruts into the woods. The tractor-tyre chevrons, pressed into the wet chalk paste of February have hardened to a concrete crust that might last all Summer.

The green fuse has pushed the subtle, beaded flowers of dog's mercury out, as well as the furred flags of cuckoo pint, above their spotted leaves. Were we ever so close to it all? Have we ever paid this much attention to noticing? I like to think so, but it was likely long ago.



I love the contrasting colourways of primrose and dog violet best. That particular butter-cream, lemon-yellow with parma-violet mauve. They are delightfully vintage colours that, were I a dress designer, I'd make my Spring-print signature. It is a colourway complimented by china-blue wood forget-me-not with its yolk-yellow and white centres, and in the sudden emergence of bluebells overnight and their yellow archangel companions.



There is a lavender haze washing through the wood where there was just a hint of it the day before. In the derelict hazel coppice, the bluebell's honey-scent mingles with stronger, heady, cherry laurel blossom that, along with western red cedar, crowds out and shades the bluebells, closes the canopy, blocks the light. Still, they persist. A light breeze weaves through the wood and there is the faint squeak of jostled bluebell stems, and the squeal of hazel poles grown too thick for coppicing.



Orange-tip butterflies tumble over garlic mustard and I am absorbed, watching a furry, ginger, bee-fly insert the long, sharp-looking (but harmless) straw of its proboscis into the creamy churns of white dead nettle flowers (that also, do not sting). I nip one of the blossoms between thumb and forefinger, and tip its flask onto my tongue, for a drop of sweet nectar.



By the time I am home, there are four swallows twittering over the house. The clustered white stars of windflowers, or wood anemones tremble in an imperceptible breeze. I resisted picking the first one I saw, weeks ago, to tuck into my collar, to ward off Spring fever.



APRIL 10, 2020

A Lucozade-Brightness, and the Nature at Hand.



Suddenly, our galloping lives, or even our quietly walking lives, have come up against a fence. We weave from foot to foot, like restless horses at a stable door. We feel at a loss, part-paralysed, cut off, anxious and adrift or, for many others, are working as if our lives depend on it, because other lives do. New words will enter dictionaries and aberrations will appear on graphs and charts, and in the geological, archaeological strata of the far future, there will be a permanent thin seam of now; of 2020, of our global plague year. We won't forget it.

In a touching memento teachers made in haste for my daughter's cut-short, cancelled GCSE generation, a keyring is etched with the words 'History Makers,' and a moving celebration was put together in a solid, 12 hour stint. The students are reminded they won't be forgotten or let down.

On Mother's Day, before full lockdown, we make meringues and walk through the village to match them with Mum's whipped cream. We swop half a bag of flour for sugar and keep a careful distance, dancing round each other like the primrose-

coloured brimstones tumbling through blue air. We make plans to turn parts of Mum's garden into a wildflower meadow.



When the Lockdown comes, we reappraise everything immediately around us, holding the everyday up to the light. Having lived a long time out here, often without transport, with three once very small children, it's something long-practiced and appreciated. Even when I'm at work, my radius from home rarely exceeds five miles. My two eldest children, both on the cusp of summers of freedom, have their wings clipped before they've even been able to use them. But they are stoic, resourceful and enjoy each other's company.

My youngest daughter rescues scarlet tiger moth caterpillars from the new vegetable beds my oldest daughter is digging; she carefully looks at one under a microscope and discovers sticky gel blobs on its tiny feet and a body rippling like a slow, pantomime horse in lemon and black. We watch the blue tits and the sparrows, we slow down, we are grateful. Our village What's App group is full of noticing nature. It becomes a What's This? of Wildthings. Each day, I message round a local 'Bird of the Day' with a song to learn among the baking, homeschooling, crafting, not-going-mad, neighbour-checking messages that bring us together now, and help alleviate the constant worry nibbling the dark edge of

everything. This community, is even kinder, funnier and more generous than I knew.



For a while, we are a house of key workers. I go in to school as support staff for as long as I can, my son is picking and packing delivery boxes at Tesco and my husband is a Paramedic. There are sobering, daily updates and conference calls at home and he is drawn into London.



We treasure our one exercise a day. It usually involves the big hill and a walk up into the feathered edge of the sky. I seem to favour evenings. The fields, dry enough at last to support a tractor, look as if someone's been at them with a curry comb, grooming in the direction of growth, following the earth's solid musculature and bone. The tilth, fine and pale as apple crumble, makes lines on a page from which the buzzards and kites can work, studiously worming.



At the height of the hill, a partridge must have breasted the barbed wire and stalled above the steeply-sloping wood. A handful of feathers are snagged on a barbed, barley twist of wire and the sunset-light through them is so beautiful, I could imagine its Icarus fall and tumble through the gold-infused air, before a recovery and rapid whirr of its wings, away.



The clarity and purity of the colours of the sunsets hold: they are not a one-off. They burn with a clear, Lucozade-brightness that is a humbling revelation, through unpolluted air, honeyed and bell-clear as blackbird song. After this, we must learn and *act* upon what our planet is showing us. *Has* been showing us. We can do this better – and we must.



At 8pm, weekly now, we clap and bang pots for our NHS, carers and keyworkers. In our quiet, spaced-out rural village, we wonder if we'll hear anybody else. And when the whoops and cheers, clatters and dings come travelling across the dark fields and quiet woods, we openly cry. The first time, under Venus and the fingernail moon, then again, when the moon has swollen to a great orange, bellying up above other estate cottages and again, when it is still light. It's the uncertainty that we're not used to. The not knowing how all this will pan out. All those questions no one has answers too. Yet, we have never felt so lucky and grateful to live where we do, never so grateful for community and the one, beautiful, sustaining planet we live on.

