

Nature Notes

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BY NICOLA CHESTER

Black Bryony and the Jaggy Creel.



Dawn, and a mist rises from the lake by the big house, and a small cloud inversion hovers over the source of the River Enborne. It lifts and mingles with a plume of smoke from the biomass wood boiler, and all is caught in the most ethereal, golden light as the sun comes up behind the trees.



After work, I climb the hill. The leafless woods now appear thin, but up here above them, a few rolled cigarillos of whitebeam leaves have been wind-speared onto a lone hawthorn tree. They rattle in a gust and as I watch, are let go like handkerchiefs on the wind, from hands waving off someone dear, departed. And all is brown.



But so many shades and varieties of brown – and green. Dunnock and wren browns, woodcock browns, russet fox and fallow deer brown, dogwood reds and blackthorn damson, moss and olive greens. Waterfalls of dried goosegrass lie over the hedges, thatching it thinly, sheeny in the light, like straw-coloured lametta, and bramble and rose briars arc high above; one like a shepherd's crook, another flicks like a driving whip. There are few berries now.





But still heaped at astonishing bright intervals are lustrous, scarlet berries on clockwise twists of raffia. Great heaves of black bryony drape and festoon the hedges and low trees, like necklaces ransacked from a props department, or Carmen Miranda's dressing room, and thrown over the hedge like gypsy washing.



As I pass the old, graffitied milking parlour (and former Rave Central) I crunch over the remains of a stolen, burnt out car from the summer. Between the bryony berries, are the cartons, wrappers and cups of a whole takeaway meal for four; up on the hill, a car engine revs and backfires as it is driven along a track not meant for it. I imagine its occupants, pursued by a police car, offloading a stolen bounty of rubied jewellery out the window of a speeding car, along with their rubbish, whooping as they go.



Another car comes belting up the hill and I slip through a gap in the hedge and push through a protective, almost impenetrable thicket of rain-jewelled blackthorn, wanting a bit of peace and solitude. Inaccessible to the hedgecutter, the thicket twinkles with finches, tits and buntings, winter thrushes, blackbirds and wrens. It is a small pocket of a sanctuary, a refuge. What Seamus Heaney called 'the blackthorn's jaggy creel.'



When I come out, all is quiet. My coat is velcroed over with burrs and the tiny cones of agrimony seeds, that I take for a brief jolt as a mass of crawling spiders. I am as camouflaged as the wren in the thicket.

