

Nature Notes

MAY 17, 2020

BY NICOLA CHESTER

A Change, Felt.



The emotional rollercoaster we are all riding, has its calm spots. There is much about 'the new normal' I am at ease with: home, family, staying local. So much so, I wonder if I haven't got off the rollercoaster entirely someday and found a quiet field somewhere, behind a gate and through a wood. I am in a fortunate position, and self-isolation comes naturally to me. But of course, there are many things, people and places that I miss very much and this situation, fringed and feathered with real anxiety and fear, is neither normal nor sustainable. But then neither is what went before. That has been thrown into sharp relief.



Dropping off a prescription to Mum, my hand on the gate latch, something like a dark jewel glinted in the cherry hedge; at eye level, close enough for her to feel my breath on her back, a hen blackbird's eye caught mine. Sat tight to her beautifully made mud-cup nest, like the lid on a pot, I recognised something of her anxiety. Stay put. Sit tight. Stay home, don't move. I snuck a sideways glance at the details of her nest; a half-inch thick deep bowl, lined with woodpigeon feathers. Then averted my gaze and moved through the gate. If you act like a predator, you will be perceived as one. She did not move.



On the way home, we stop to chat to friends, falling naturally into a socially distanced quadrant, as if we are about to begin a country dance. While we are talking, I hear a wave of alarm from the birds around us – the piping shrill of a blackbird, the alarm of swallows, and feel a slight disturbance, half-imagined, of the air. The frisson of a sparrowhawk passing through.

Similarly, the weather changes like that, with a surprise, as surely if someone reached out to pat my arm with cold fingers. Though I know it is coming, the first hint I get is when a finger of wind touches my forearm, alerting me to a hole in the newly leafy hedge. On investigation, I discover a small thoroughfare for muntjac deer, fox and badger. And just like that, the new green blades of corn, just high enough to show wind direction, tremble begin their running-pelt wave towards the south west.



The cow parsley is lacing the frothy edge of hawthorn in blossom, and down a newly tarmacked piece of lane, the chalky prints of a badger's evening activities are recorded.



I feel like I've shed a layer of skin; everything is so sensitive, so connected, so urgent and enduring; comforting and vulnerable. As we begin to make our first, tentative, anxious steps out of this, we must find ways to live lighter and better, Kinder, more generously, more aware of all our neighbours, of inequalities, wild or human. I do not traditionally like change, but, as I read in *I Am An Island* by Tamsin Calidas recently (a book for our times) tradition can be 'a wearisome, coercive thing.' The planet is our next disaster. In fact, it's a current, ongoing disaster that we ignore at our peril. We must make a new contract with nature, and there will be a cost. But we have shown we can change, adjust, accommodate and reach out, and we can put all we have learnt and been through to good use, beyond the controlling of this virus.



Something wakes me in the night and I lean out of the window. Under a moon so bright in a night so clear, woodpigeons are calling a soothing lullaby. I wish I could show you how deep the moonshadow is, of the wood below the down. It is profoundly dark; a mirror image pool of spread ink. An upside-down cumulous of black cloud. So dark, if I went out, I might be inclined to walk on the diamond-bright field of flints and moon-rubble chalk, and circumscribe its unfathomable depth.

MAY 5, 2020

A Windmill for Kites.



On the last morning of my 49th year, I woke to the cuckoo calling loudly through the open window, from Nightingales Wood. I dreamt his first woodwind notes, before I realised they were real. The year before last, he didn't come at all – and I feared that would be it. An extinction of cuckoos. In my twenties, at my parents' house, a nightingale would arrive in the dead of night and his song would mingle with my dreams in the days around my birthday, until I woke to find he was real. But he was an 'endling' bird, singing long and loud, night after night and through the day too, perfecting his song in vain. This torch singer never found a mate. I've never found a singer to match him.



When I drew back the curtains, there was another surprise waiting – in the cascade of the dawn chorus, a barn owl on the fence post. A little, blossom-white spook, heart-shaped face tilted to the sky, to me, to the ground; a stone-carved, fence post pencil-topper. Two years ago, my lovely father-in-law made me a barn owl box and put it up in a nearby stag-headed oak tree. It was the best birthday present then, and this year, it got even better. A pair of nesting barn owls for a fiftieth birthday? Never in my wildest wild dreams did I think I'd have that.



It is the very best time of year to have a birthday and surely, this has been the most poignantly beautiful April in living memory. The blowsiest, bluest, blossomiest spring. Perhaps, as many are saying, it's because we are really living it, really noticing our confined, immediate surroundings? How green the new leaves! How they *zing!* The lavender haze of honey-scented bluebells and the bright butter-yellow of the rape fields seem profoundly intense, against the Wedgwood sky that tumbles skylark song and holly blue butterflies like soft falling jigsaw pieces. We walked for miles, up the ancient cartway from Bitham Farm to Jethro Tull's Prosperous.



Another cuckoo. I closed my eyes and wept with joy and relief. Whitethroats scratch their jazzy, melodious, DJ-on-the-decks song with frenetic energy, within the dance hall, cumulous cloud-heights of scented, buzzing, crab apple-blossom. Wayfaring trees lead us on, beyond where bare earth ceeds to grass, and through clouds of my own, special fly; St Mark's Flies are named for the Saints day upon which my birthday falls, when they traditionally emerge. They didn't disappoint, flying slowly in small clouds, their soft black bodies dangling long legs like fisherman's flies.



In the stillness of the afternoon, the house became a windmill for kites. They rotated low above it, after the detached lamb's tails in the field opposite. Their bladed shadows formed large, fingered, rhythmic sails, that made me duck as I walked out the front door.

Everything stands still.



On the big hill, the landlord of our estate cottage and his family make a tribute to the NHS with rainbow-coloured childrens' party parachutes, the size of a chalk figure. My husband being a Paramedic, we all find it particularly poignant and climb the hill for a closer look. But, as with all white horse magic, the trick is that, the nearer you get, the further away the whole of it is.



My almost-planned village hall party will wait. For this was truly the simplest, best and most memorable birthday ever; with surprise Zoom Bingo, hosted by my dinner jacketed brother in Australia, village friends rallying round with decorations, inventive doorstep gifts (flour! yeast!) artwork from daughters and nephews, the most gorgeous homemade cake, tractors tooting as they drove past the house and a candlelit game of family Cluedo in the evening.



Our cramped, shabby, in need of a good-clean-&-tidy house has never felt more like a home. Has there ever been such a gifted spring to bring us to our senses?

