

# **Poems of Botany and Revolution**

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**Mel Witherden**

## **Breakthrough**

The trees prevail, while  
woodland plants survive as dark ideas of themselves  
beneath the beech and holly and oaks,  
beneath the leaf mould soaked in surface run off  
and beneath the soil.

They bide their time.  
Woodland is defined by a dominant autocracy,  
but who could deny that some day, some year  
the canopy might fail,  
that soft silk-coated petals, white and yellow,  
might master the forest floor with their brilliance?

On a given sign each spring the ground erupts  
with the singleminded madness of their chemistry;  
a brief flash flood of colour  
washes out the greys and browns -  
wood sorrel, celandine, anemone -  
till the fresh olive green of tree top leaves  
poisons the petals with darkness.

But, what if ...  
when the flowers break from cover the trees have  
the sun in their eyes, not knowing who is for and against;  
when they push in blindness to the surface  
they have already planned the campaign;  
what if they arrive with unity of purpose  
and not in competition?  
Could they then supersede the trees?

Spring flowers preserve their possibility unfailingly;  
and each year dogs mercury comes and goes  
in green obscurity,  
ignominious, prepared.

21.7.93

## **Celandine**

consider the quality of the celandine  
like but unlike any yellow headed daub  
on a green brown canvas:  
star fingered  
sheen wrapped for a while,  
striking first for the sky  
before woodland leaves,  
first with their own light,  
first of any buttercup to try,  
first alive and first to die:  
opportunist  
in self sacrifice.

*c1970*

## **The names of trees**

Oak is open, round, hard leaved, defined.  
Yew is definitive and true;  
spruce is a usage that needs no excuses,  
and larch is sparse, tall and solemn as Church.  
Cedar and fir do not stir, but singly hold firm  
as their silence returns to farthest purrs  
in serried forest armies and hilltop stands.  
Willow bends about to meet itself, silken,  
unenclosed; the alder and osier more so.  
Plane is plain and level flight  
and pine is designed for take off,  
powered by gentle detonation,  
Birch and beech (one bleak, one deep)  
are among the least secret of trees;  
they burst like belishas on leafscapes  
at once both bold and austere.  
We claim what we name, so it's simple to tell  
that ash and elm lack the dash and consonant will  
with which to resist the axe, or to match  
the deadly facts that melt live cells;  
the power is ours  
when so much is heard in a word.

*MJW*  
6.8.96

## **Rush**

"I'm in no rush,"  
boasted the smug swamp water;  
it paused in pools glazed  
by glancing early sun,  
and soothed away the solid root-clamped soil  
to a soft enclosing velvet ooze.  
Still and cool, the water  
reckoned without osmotic pressure,  
entertained no notion of root hair power  
and its own dendritic destiny.

So in time came the xylem slide  
upward to the sheathlike *Juncus* leaves.  
When it hit the surface, sunlight blasted  
its molecules to another state  
of being, where, airborne and freefalling through  
three dimensions, all semblance of control  
evaporated, or so it transpired.

**7.93**

## **Dog's mercury**

Everywhere it's dogs mercury  
that turns earth green, appears to be  
a plant of continuity,  
holding on all year, patiently.

But that spring thought's a fallacy:  
the more we look the less we see.  
Then, March again, we'll easily  
dismiss its rediscovery.

*MJW*  
22.05.03

## **Primrose**

Not the first to burst,  
the primrose name refers to  
light and earth, not words.

*MJW*  
*21.3.06*

## Snap

An oak tree by the old canal has split in two;  
the trunk has peeled apart from itself, almost to  
the ground, revealing its heart, and branches weave  
helpless gestures in the air. The cuneiform bark  
is mossed, tangled rough and smooth, green and brown and black,  
but inside the untoothed crack, in the bright clean rip  
of drying wood, the sucrose surge survives; precious  
tree life flows still, and grows somehow ridiculous.

You don't see human beings splitting at the seams;  
we're far too flexible, too cunning, too untaut  
to snap in two. Though we may grow stooped and crusted  
we won't stand still until we must - we are not exposed.  
Though gruesome accidents and surgery may lop  
our limbs, we don't come apart; and though delving quacks  
may laser-zap estranged cells which we cannot name,  
you won't see men and women let in wind and rain:  
we're more careful with intrusions, sooner with roofs,  
we're more aware of pain and wearing waterproofs.

Cities are for populations, places to stay  
awake and safe in illumination, taking  
work to survive in permanent daylight, stealing  
each other in darkness for our recreation;  
we don't become dormant at the whim of seasons  
we've surely no reason to store our years in rings,  
we don't need roots to stand, we're free to dance and fly;  
and we don't hang around in the street when we die.

Hundreds pass by where the tree split, walking their dogs,  
steering skips, dreaming or draining their loves away,  
while the weather of experience stains the scar  
and mosses come to soften broken surfaces,  
cover its disaster, disguise the tree's escape,  
which so few of us could distinguish or explain.

*MJW*  
27.10.97



## **Townhall clock**

clocktower shock flower, stray  
moschatel can't tell the hours  
but may make your day

*MJW*  
24.3.06

## **Rock samphire**

Office blocks soar like sheer sea cliffs.  
traffic-waves wheel and wash about them;  
while the crush of people piles and pulses,  
crashing at crossings with the undertow of cars.  
We are rock samphire salad, scaling swaying heights,  
clamped leech-like on ledges out of reach  
defying dizzy depths – plants to die for.

*MJW*  
4.4.02

## **Mushrooming**

Autumn rain had come at last like revenge  
after drought's outrage, and the mountain took  
its breath: this was the mushroom time of year  
when they filed the hill-line searching the turf  
together for its eerie fruit, and found none.  
Where was the ragged dance of parasols  
where were mind-melting red agarics?  
Where would the pearls of oysters find their poise?  
Had the long parching summer claimed the earth,  
had the foetid air neutered every spore?  
The woods yielded needles, the fields dry seeds  
and knapweed brittle as parchment, despite  
the rain. A quarry stabbed the valley side,  
drawing red-grey rubble stains from the wound;  
a distant reservoir shoved through the gloom,  
narrower, browner now. Hidden in all  
the usual places, mitochondria  
made sly private plans, if they lived at all;  
Beech trees were on the turn, their thin nuts fell;  
a hairbell lingered, exposed and solitary;  
foxglove flowers had all but turned to dust.  
The mushroom party paced the pastureland  
in edgy uncertainty, and still found none.  
Was their search too early, was it too late?  
How long should they stay? Was their job to wait?  
A kestrel, killing doubt, swayed on the air  
above them, holding out for vole and mouse;  
and on every ancient surface meanwhile,  
fungi are in fact consuming the world.  
Might it be time to decide whether death  
is better than the pain of survival?  
must their purpose always be so much less  
when there's only fungus left to die for?

## **Spurge**

The spurge is a plant between  
spurn and purge,  
and not even either of these.  
It sneaks its frequency into our lives  
like fruit flies, moss and myth,  
seemingly sexless, flowers  
all the same as its leaves,  
weak green till it wrinkles  
and shrinks to winter's nil.  
Its strength is insignificance:  
next year its seeds will  
heave aside the earth and shoot these  
fragile fleshy surfaces from  
every unfilled vegetative space.  
and when we least expect, this weed  
of disturbance, ubiquitous, defiant,  
will come again and then again,  
all spur and surge.

*13.11.93*

## **Agrimony**

little known  
the flower  
leans against hill air  
holds nothing in its petals  
but identity  
dies slowly down without  
decreasing  
follows its seeds into  
the earth  
and goes again without name

*10.9.68*

## **Escape**

the large evening primrose,  
so called for its scent  
late in the day,  
frequently an escape:  
comes like the seed of a tragic hero  
to flower on wasteground  
ignorant of docks and nettle -  
the green flowers that face the autumn;  
large evening primrose,  
opening for something late in the day,  
frequently an escape

7.69

## **Corporation daffodil**

Judy by the riverside holds a corporation daffodil  
lightly in her hand  
as a gardening official rises from a nearby bed  
to point an accusation at her  
with a finger of his total unconcern;  
her own suspicions of suspicion  
pushes open morning guilt of things  
against the river safety-fence  
till Judy throws it all away.

Judy gazes longingly through her mind's  
preoccupation where it fell  
and a daffodil lingers with her  
decisive and helpless before it sinks  
like any other illicit public plant  
dropped into the stream -  
something to be rid off, something she could keep.

Judy and the river toy with the hollow stem;  
as naturally, she picked a blade of grass  
a day ago sunbathing on her lawn  
and broke its back with automatic fingers.  
She senses petals softly  
touching her imagination  
but her hands are really empty  
and lost yellow specks  
widen across water,  
and her hands really are empty  
now that Judy finds  
there's something on her mind.

The theft-detected daffodil  
disintegrates later as it floats away to meet  
its private liquid microbes of decay;  
but already with her thoughts  
Judy tears the sepals from the unprotected flower head,  
nakedly reveals the stigma,  
obliterates the style,  
while grains of pollen wrestle insensibly  
to generate an embryonic understanding  
of what she did last night.

10.4.68

## **The examiner of grass**

The examiner of grass  
says it is all hard graft,  
flounders in a lake of blades  
and throws a glance behind his paunch  
at the workaday monotony around.

Christ, do they know what it means  
to leave him alone!  
He moves in a green sunsharpened glume,  
close to the axil of his life,  
specified, prominent, the smear on the slide -  
awnless auricles, and exposed.

In the whole afternoon he moves only inches.



## **Jack-by-the-hedge**

the shyness of wood sorrel isn't sorrow;  
it's May, not "maybe" or dismay,  
which lights the hedgerows here today;  
it's furze not cursed, and whin not lose,  
when roadsides are alive with gorse;  
the archangel's not Gabriel but yellow.

the bulbs fill up with life to shine next year -  
they're daffodils, not death or ills,  
which love the sun so much it spills,  
and these are wood anemones -  
not an enemy, not disease -  
which seize the naked woodlands without fear.

flowers paint out the stains of earth's decay:  
it's violets, not violence,  
which colour hedgebanks with their scents,  
then it's heartsease, not a heart's cease,  
that catches our breath in the leas:  
though we'll still mourn, we will recall this day.

they're bluebells, not church bells; the lady's smock  
and woodrush are too loose and fast  
to mock; deadnettle are not past  
when we come to pine by the stream's edge  
and find firm, strong jack-by-the-hedge,  
with the spring which works the dandelion clock.

*MJW*  
4.98

# REFUGEES

## 1: Migration

I'm not the first to travel north. Vagrants  
came ten thousand years ago just behind  
retreating ice, where outwash torrents gouged  
out every crushed rock fragment, every grain,  
and smeared the melted valleys with moraine,  
The land was all abandonment behind,  
an ice-scorched earth of broken bouldered plains,  
bleached as bone and blistered in returning sun.  
Then early moss and lichens climbed the chins,  
till their chilled green and livid outlines milled  
stark surfaces and crusted sand and stones.  
Next, taking root in rock-flake lichen-rot,  
the first frail alpine flowers cling-filmed the earth,  
flat as slabs, their white-petalled power poised  
to seed and survive. Sedges lodged in gravel;  
spike roots staked down the docks and dandelions.  
Pine, birch, juniper, willow, wilder trees,  
all steered by warming air, by beak, by fur,  
by foot, by gut now colonised the meres  
and screes, a kilometre every year.

## 2: Invasion

They came as seeds or cattle feed, and spread  
with trading ships, marched north on soldiers' feet,  
ranged strange as gypsies selling fragrances  
or slaves on sun-baked Italian terraces.  
These priceless spice racks and physician's chests  
filled cold damp Romano-British gardens –  
with scents of marjoram and bay and balm,  
mint to sooth after the pleasure of food,  
fennel to calm, and midwife feverfew.  
Their virtues and their bane were life and death,  
as the gains of their benign invasion  
inverted all the ordinary wars  
and burned our browning territories green.  
There is no context now, or history,  
no Latin names, not even irony:  
medicines can be made from plants, for free,  
a scientist claims on daytime TV.

## 3. The spoils of war

They came north on naval ships, coasters, tramps

and merchantmen: leaves and seeds seized for crown  
and country gents by Hooker, Wilson, Banks,  
the hothouse Heroes of Herbaria  
and all their hard plant-hunting hangers on.  
No continent, no wilderness was meant  
to go unplundered by these trainspotter  
botanists and dumb name-swot collectors,  
who thought they ought to pot the bloody lot,  
and transport it home like pond-dipping kids  
dripping on the floor, sure they'd be adored.  
They spawned the so-called nurserymen, whose hauls  
of mutant blooms loosed purses in suburban halls,  
whose balsams, knotweeds, rhododendrons thrall'd  
and then appalled a pliant gardening world -  
plant-pimps who, like Frankensteins and Hydes, forced sex  
on frail and innocent floescences.  
Such science wasn't mad enough for some:  
meet Professor J Heslop Harrison  
who, to be first to find new British plants,  
dug up strange alpine rarities in France  
and spliced them to unlikely crags on Rhum.

Today sane men are cleansing native weeds  
with toxic sprays while splashing daffodils  
too weird to be real down smart city streets.  
We turn our backs and aliens attack -  
defiant Himalayan balsam throws  
it sneak hegemony up river banks  
and outflanks us with tireless backward flows;  
the caliphate of knotweed's now so dire  
brigades of landscape men are armed with fire.  
Hampton Court and Chelsea stalk and taunt us  
like spoiled and raucous brats who exalt us  
to gawp and marvel at their ever dafter, crass  
and inept shows, while what really sparks us  
is springtime's hedgerow rush of wild primrose.

#### **4: Collateral damage**

Few cold-blooded heroes of ice-age floes  
resisted high on mountain peaks and grasped  
at crevices of life above the snows:  
these days of warming air may be their last.

Now we're prepared to deal with climate change:  
which desert xerophytes to put on show,  
and who, when rivers flood, must take the blame.  
Let's hope catastrophe won't come too slow.

Today ten million gardeners in cars

turn ecology on its pretty head  
by cultivating town-edge shopping sheds  
and importing plants from who-knows-how-far.

But in the unseen slipstream of our wheels,  
the sweet warm carbon of our cars' exhaust,  
will enflame the thugs from overseas to feel  
up native skirts and force fresh species north.

While borders flood with foreign DNA  
migration's not the cause but consequence  
of what our landscapes and our gardens say:  
"We despise your folly and your omnipotence."

## **5. Reparations**

I'm driving north again against the flow  
while office girls and men of coal and steel  
are sliding south since their jobs here have slipped  
away on the nation's tilted strata.  
Down there the factories and houses slot  
into a prefab land like Lego bricks;  
here they are stones which hills and fields subsume  
and rivers probe, immovable, weighed down  
by past certainties, outlasting markets.  
I'm travelling north through anaemic towns  
where alien economies drain blood  
and hope, where new synthetic marble malls,  
in desperate pretence of southern health,  
discount a scruffy end in car-free streets  
of food banks, charities and boarded shops.  
I'm unravelling northwards to crags and fells  
on minor roads flushed and burnished  
by rain, chasing down the swirling wake  
of strangers – rosebay, ragwort, scurvygrass  
– that hide in the back of traffic, pose threats  
to our history, and call in ancient debts.

It's time we updated our strategies  
for hating and creating refugees:  
no one should take responsibility;  
everyone will pay, but it won't be me.

2015