

Snow



Small flakes spiralling
Cold on damp melting
The world greying
Houses shiver under wet roofs
Trees drink in great gulps
Cars slow then spring ahead
Lights sparkle or quaver
Sound quavers too
Then stills

Sharp flakes needling
Ice on ice driving
The world hurting
Houses flinch beneath metal skies
Trees sway at the assault
Cars spin then skid awry
Lights dance or flicker
Sound flickers too
Then stills

Huge flakes smothering
White on black swirling
The world narrowing.
Houses cower behind closed doors
Trees shrivel into deep roots
Cars loom then disappear
Lights fail or waver
Sound wavers too
Then stills

White drifts glistening
Quartz on silver shimmering
The world shining
Houses crouch inside warmed walls
Trees display jewelled arms
Cars slide then come to rest
Lights pale and are muted
Sound is muted too
Then stills

Grey in January



Grey
Cold grey
Not the crisp off-white chill of ice or snow
Not the warm grey of clouds of summer rain
A dull day

Grey
Grey thoughts
Not the frisson of grey approaching dusk
Not the warm grey sea of semi-dreaming
Dull thoughts

Grey
Grey life
No tinge of green, blue, gold, emergent spring
No warmth of summer or of autumn colours gleaming
Just grey

Grey
Grey skies

No other colour except beige dry grass
Nothing quickening the winter mind
A grey day

On hyacinths opening in February



'Red'
it said
on the plastic label
and I wondered as I set
the basket on the table
what kind of red?
And so I pondered.

The red of sunsets,
of robins' breasts,
of anger
or traffic lights,
of jelly tongue twisters
or sunrises that, warning
shepherds or sailors,
in the morning
are simply red.

Scarlet,
hue of pomp and circumstance,
or flagrant
adultery,
of shame
or fame;
a colour with a dual nature,
Is scarlet.

Blood
speaks for itself
of injury or death;
of class (though maybe then it's blue)
of ancestry,
(it may
be used in heraldry),
of diverse things like
fox hunting and the final brush
(though not the coats)
and geraniums,
does blood.

Crimson:
royal, yet
colour of shame.
Cheeks, stained,
may be aristocratic
but derided.
It can be literary
contrasted with white.
The very word
echoes with jewels
and depths
and night,
or gorgeous knights
caparisoned
in crimson.

Ruby
states gems outright
but lips too,
ready to be kissed,
and apples or plums
ripe
for the picking,
the eating,
the stealing.
It hints of larceny,
deception
and desire,
does ruby.

Vermilion
is just a foreign way
to say
red
and can have shades
of ruby
crimson, scarlet
or any other red
unless it's in a paint tray.
Every meaning we assign

to each of those we attach, too,
to vermilion.

For a week
I watered the basket
judiciously
while the buds stayed tight
and green;
no red to be seen,
then the sun must
have reached within
and told
the petals to unfold.
They were not red at all
but deep, deep, deepest pink,
beautiful and scented
but not
(most definitely not)
red.



March



It didn't come in like a lamb or a lion.
More like a skittish goat, or a March hare
ready to box for domination. Or perhaps a polar bear
exploring tentatively south of the ice cap
but prowling,
not roaring,
quiet to lull
the unsuspecting population.

Strong gusts
came without warning,
amid snow, frost, hot sun.
Not so much
global warming
as severe change
and a dizzying sense
of doom.

Spring leapt into action:
cherry blossom, daffodils,
crocus, forsythia
and even,
on the south coast
rumours of magnolia
and then
it snowed again.

It wasn't friendly snow.
It didn't fall softly overnight.
The children never got to build a snowman
or sledge down a slope of white.
It snarled the traffic
(and the flower buds)
then crept away
before anyone could play.

If the lion and the lamb are absent,
unaccountably diverted or delayed
will the month depart
soft with Easter chicks and rabbit kits
or will high winds from the north pole
shatter the world apart?
Whatever looms I think most
will be glad when this March is spent.

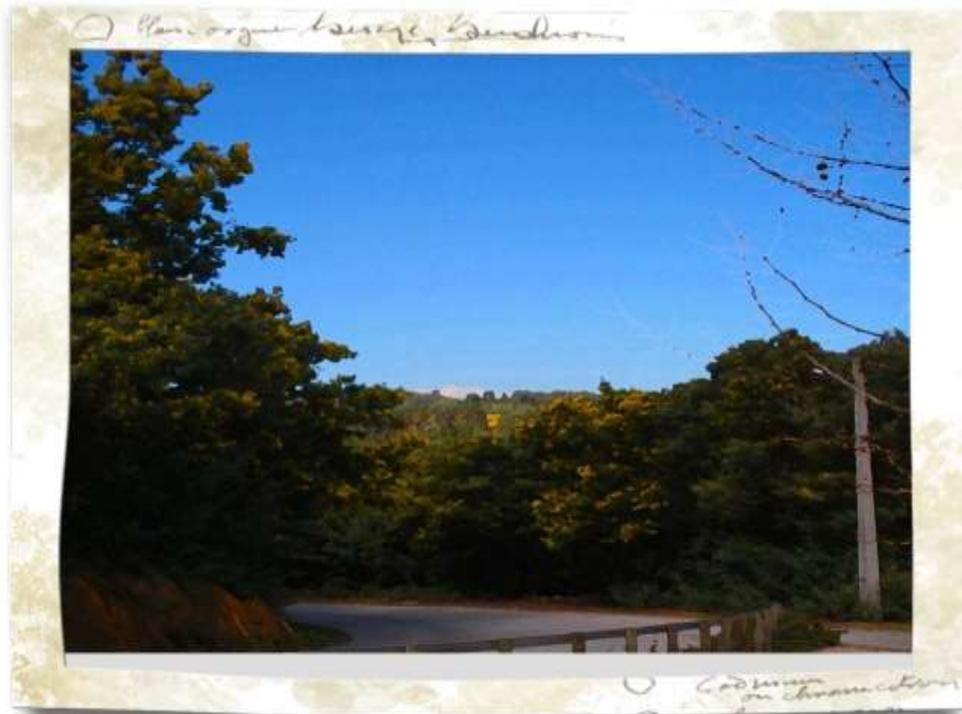
Iris



She came out
on the first day of sunshine
and stood proud
(in a carpet
of last year's dried grass)
through a week of hail and rain
even braving snow
to show
her beauty.
By the time her sister
(who could have been a twin)
joined her, she was fading,
but still strong.
A bold spirit wrapped

in gold-shot purple silk,
she held the frost at bay.
When their much younger
sibling (or niece or daughter)
came peeping
blue and fresh behind their skirts
(small and impertinent as is the way
of the very young)
she was old,
paper-thin and ragged
but still challenging
the cold.

March clearances in Portugal



The road crew came, setting
out their small signs and taking
the business of directing
traffic very seriously.
Red for stop
Green for go
Yellow for the mimosas
they were cutting
slashing
stacking

clearing.

Sad to see the blossom
destroyed
at the height of its pride
but in a few weeks there would be interdictions
against bonfires.
Few landowners would want
to store and squirrel
the wood against the winter cold.
The heavier timber, dried,
would keep flames burning
when the flowers were just a dream
but the yellow flames
of the mimosa blooms would not warm
the woodstoves
when the world turned
again to ice.

Without the harvesting
the flames would burn
wild and bright in the summer sun.
So the road crew did what had to be done,
and moved on.

(Various sources assure us that mimosa is a tropical weed that has spread to Europe and we know the roadside trees and shrubs are a fire hazard but the flowers are some of the first colours of spring and are simply glorious.)

The end of March



March came in like a lion;
went out like one
as well, roaring.
(There had been
calm times in between.)
Pale petals
grabbed from trees before
the flowers were fully formed
mixed with the snow
that dissolved on the bare ground.
Bins scuttled down the road,
alive and rattling,
shedding rubbish as they went.
Washing landed
in a fishpond
for a second soak
(startling the inhabitants).
The prop that should have held
the clothesline firm
dug itself into the grass
to avoid being sent arcing
like a javelin
point first to a bitter end.
Hail drummed
on cars, paths, windows, roofs
and all around,
nestling like spilled sugar
in new foxglove leaves.
A fence waved, rippling
as if a mirage had taken hold
but it was only the wind
telling the world
that April was coming;
in its own, cold,
boisterous fashion
trumpeting Spring.

April on the Wirral



Pale shards of semi-whiteness across the river mouth:
thin cranes and looming gantries of the docks.
Against them, a brighter whiteness,
a lighthouse layered in sharp focus on its rocks,
the causeway a line of dark in the murky sea,
gulls following in case scraps were left behind.
An unrenovated fort stands
(proud as the lighthouse), sand
beneath, the strip decreasing with the rising tide.

Children, crowded on the shrinking beach,
pull small dogs in and out of lapping waves
or scramble barefoot, risking a spiked ending to the day
on boulders that keep the invading sea at bay.
A small yacht motors calmly towards the open water,
heading for the mists,
a noisy boat pulls a smaller one
in looping spirals round
the lighthouse just for fun
and there are shrieks of fright or glee
while shuffling figures watch from a pontoon
moored by a buoy that guards the channel
in case a ferry should go astray.

Crowds, shops, cars
as far
as the eye can see.
A queue to find a space and then
another queue
for toilets or a drink,
or sandwiches that by the time the queue has gone
have vanished too.

Shaking the sand off our feet
and clutching a picnic lunch we steal away
further along the coast and round the headland.
Turning south we reach
a long flat beach,
the tide by now almost to the horizon.
A few dogs chase each other or a thrown ball;
a car braves the boat ramp
driving in crazy rings near the sea wall.

The crowds have stayed
near the shops and ice cream vans.
Here there is loneliness and space,
only a few miles away.
We eat, watching a huge stretch of damp sand
spread out to a charcoal smudge of what might be
sea.
A horse thuds past, cantering against the sky.
Could we ride, we wonder,
all the way out to Ireland if we were foolish enough to try?

April thoughts



Cherry trees made an altogether glorious parade
And a magnolia cast a huge upside-down-umbrella shade.
Forsythia was golden.
The violets were out
But the taller trees determined
That Spring was not about.

There were daffodils in the breeze, dancing
While the glossy bluebell leaves were thrusting.
A lilac sprouted leaf buds.
A willow wept yellow-green.
Still the taller trees determined
That Spring had not been seen.

The sycamore was one that made a start
Wearing tight furled leaves to look the part
Though the other woodland giants
Were resolutely bare.
For the taller trees determined
That Spring truly wasn't there.

The elm-tree boles that might have wished to please
Were all just memories through Dutch disease.
The chaffinches were nesting
(Though not on any orchard bow)
And the taller trees determined
It was too cold for Spring right now.

Magpies chased off last year's offspring.
Aconites were this month's bling.
Some ducks were building nests
And the geese honked, full of cheer,

While the taller trees determined
That Spring might just be near.

The branches raised to greet the driving rain
Were uniformly black without a stain
Of green. Beneath them flowers
And birds (and lambs) told all of England how
Despite the taller trees' determination
It was April now.

(With apologies to Robert Browning)

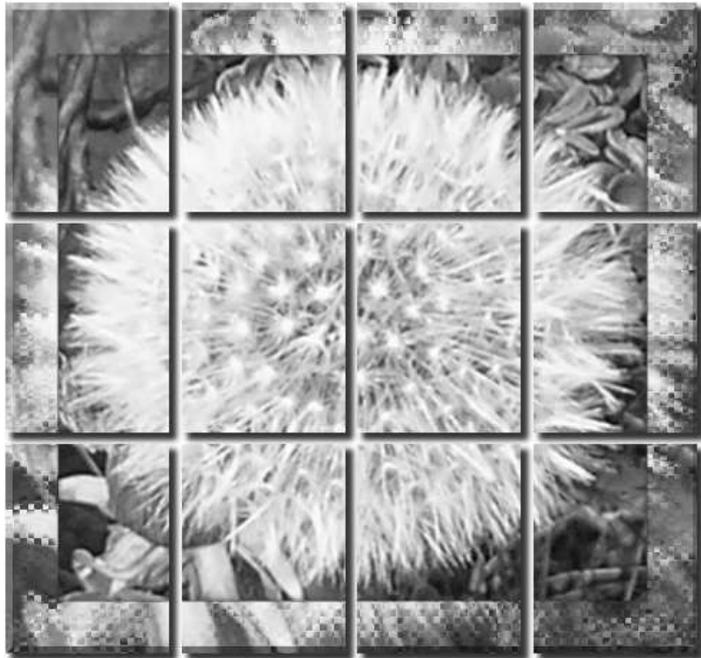
Wet spring



After the bravery of the crocus bed was dashed
And the daffodils danced in vain
The fruit blossoms hung heavy and long,
Sullen promise of good harvest if the bees
Had not been kept at home
Fearing windtorn wings and sodden fur.
February frosts marched into an April
Whose showers drenched May
But still the flowers rose,
Shaking their sodden blooms,
Turning soaked faces to the rain,
Cajoled out of winter hiding
By the promise of light nights;
Certainly not by a warmth that never came.
Forget-me-nots tried to capture
An audience in the lanes
But humans scurried to car or door, heads down,
Hidden beneath umbrellas or wide hoods.
(Flowers hardly noticed would surely be forgotten.)
Bluebells rang a brazen fanfare to spring

But no-one listened.
Lilac competed with the clouds,
Intending a colour statement to brighten lives
But tints were leached out by leaden skies,
And then the delicate sprays
Were crushed by storms.
Just recently the may decided to recall
That this month was its own peculiar thralldom;
The hedgerows are alive with whiteness
But the skies remain grey.

Dandelion clock



Coach horses, coach horses, what time of day?
One o'clock, two o'clock, three and away!

The rhyme slips smoothly through my mind.
While your star seeds prance,
ready to run with the wind.

Children try, excited,
for the smallest number
and the fastest end.
Once upon a time
I might have copied them.

If I blow gently,
with care the count might reach ten
or even midnight's chimes.
No point beyond that.
Starting again at one would not
help hold back the time.

These horses should plod slowly.
The coachman should restrain
his team and let the days pass
quietly with sunshine-filled laziness
in the long grass.

Summer is not for thundering hooves
or scattering hours.
In a season too short for true pleasure.
Even the wildest of flowers
should learn to enjoy leisure.

Your clock is impatient
but my breath is contained.
Dandelion, your coach horses must stay;
without my soft huff of agreement
they cannot yet race away.

Autumn leaves



They keep falling.
Some still green, clinging.
Some drab and shrivelled, already dead, not merely dying.

Some, painted red, yellow, tan or oxblood,
Are spiralling and flying.

They keep travelling.
Some chase each other as they fall, dancing
In winds that take them far from their beginnings,
A last journey of delight and new-born wonder,
With wishes granted for those catching.

They keep drifting
Some dry and edge-curved are high-piling
Into mounds of brown with crimson or ochre peeping
When feet, finding the ground obscured
Simply plough through, crunching.

They keep rustling.
Sounds of life and summer faintly crying
Until rain spreads spores of decaying
And the sodden mass merges with mud
Or drains, sighing.

They keep wandering.
When all have fallen, a few, staying
True to some heroic myth of surviving,
Maintain lace skeletons to delight anyone finding.
Above all, and beneath all lying,
They keep dying.

Advent



These are the days
the days that pass in a blur of dark and light

the days when by mid afternoon
we huddle in our curtained rooms
and shut out the night.

The days of miracle
the days that are full of glittered decoration
the days when presents fill the minds of everyone
to give and to receive, wrap and unwrap
and share, with anticipation.

These are the days of wonder
the days of glistening lights on every street
the days when trees leave the forest
to wear indoor finery while we call
cheerful blessings to all we meet.

These are the days of miracle and wonder
The short days of the solstice and the longest night
the days when the world sleeps and yet
outside my door an onamental quince has already
opened new flowers to welcome the light.

(With apologies to Paul Simon)
