

Nature Notes

NOVEMBER 29, 2020

BY NICOLA CHESTER

Wild Light, Weather, Portals.



In the last hour of light, I walk along the high chalk ridge to a spot where I'm hoping for closer views of fallow deer. I find I am walking between storms; the loose flint vertebrae of the whaleback rattle away from my boots. The hill's spine soars clear of the cloudbursts that obliterate everything below and in turns, either side of me. The view is whitewashed out, then revealed again in shimmering light, as if someone is playing with the curtains. I walk deliciously between the lot, feeling hidden then highlighted; as if I've been invited onto the stage of a show I don't entirely understand.



Low weather shape-shifts above me into the deep, pendulous dapple of mammatus clouds. I watch them grow heavier, like drops bulging from a yard tap, before they burst individually in washing line sheets. A short, bright rainbow forms at one corner.



A spell of calm follows and I tuck in against the trunk of a beech tree. My dog leans against me. We can both hear the belching grunts of fallow bucks far below. They are still in their rut.

There is a slight noise to our left and, unexpectedly, a big chestnut buck comes pronking on his hooves, wild-eyed out of the woods and almost upon us. In one great move he shies and cat leaps the fence behind us, all four feet off the ground at once. He stops in the wood and turns to face us. For a reverent moment, we are held in the magnificent cradle-gaze of his antlers. The yellow glow of the hazel trees around his head seem to emanate from the pale tines of them, like lit candles on a Hanukkah Menorah.



The spell is broken by more noise to our left: another, big dark buck comes out of the wood, sees us and plunges downhill, his splayed hoofs sliding on the steep slope for purchase, his shoulder blades coming up like pistons working to control the weight of him downhill at speed.

Back on the track I pick up pace as the world seems to darken and go molten at once. The sky swirls around the sunset of an exhilarating Turner painting and I feel caught up in it.



A wisp of snipe arrow through it after their long, sharp bills, like a shoal of unearthly fish – I expect the cloud to burst.



Over my shoulder, the setting sun ignites the flooded track ruts into long mirrors of gold. In a trick of the light, they seem to stand upright, like gleaming wet sarsen megaliths, or a glowing absence of them: mirrors stood on end, portals back to a world I seem to have just left. Between them, reflected on the chalky mud, the first pale stars appear.



NOVEMBER 15, 2020

The Light, & the Dying of the Ash Trees.



A poignant, devastating light is falling on the ash trees, illuminating their grey skeletons. The sheer scale of the loss of them, has become obvious and widespread this year. There are ghosts in the woods.

Chalara ash dieback was officially identified in the UK in 2012. The fungal spores that cause it probably blew in across the channel, although its advance was accelerated by imported, infected nursery stock. The fungus co-exists with its host species of ash tree in East Asia, where the trees have long since evolved to cope.



Ash is our third most abundant tree and most common hedgerow tree. Whole woods will be lost, and the landscape changed forever. The economic cost alone is forecast at £15bn. Our history, culture and human progress is lashed to the ash trees. On an open fire it is the most reliable wood to burn for steady, sustaining warmth; especially if it has the natural firelighters of 'cramp balls' or King Alfred's cake fungus attached. But it is a tree that we will all, most likely, have held in our hands at some point. Strong, flexible and shock-resistant, before steel, it was used to make boats, wheels and ploughs, and all manner of hand held tools, sports equipment and implements – it still is.

High on the downs, where the view stretches full counties, it is suddenly easy to pinpoint swathes of dying trees, like grey smoke drifting from bonfires. Their canopies were noticeably light this year and the black-spotted, curled leaves have fallen early, leaving the trees mid-winter bare. Some still clutch bunches of brown seed keys.



The grey, deeply fissured bark of one great tree, hundreds of years old, bears dark cankers and lesions along its limbs. A squirrel corkscrews up its trunk, like honeysuckle up a blackthorn stick, its tail glitching in a reverse question mark. The shape of the ash is like no other. It falls into a graceful chandelier, the branches and twigs curving upwards in a lilt at their tips. This one still has a few leaves. A breeze ruffles lightly along a diseased bough, with the playful lightness of a hand up a sleeve. And right then, the end of the bough falls in front of me, brittle, almost hollow.



Trees start shedding limbs at 50% leaf loss.

Beside it, saplings have sprung up, but their ends appear scorched; browning, curling and dying. On the steep slope, the entire hanging wood is ash. I try to imagine it without them, and can't.

We stand to lose so much more than the trees. Ash is a keystone tree. Emily Beardon writes in *The Biologist*, that 950 species rely on ash trees.



This national, natural disaster is creeping up on us and the thought almost prostrates me with grief. I love the lamp black buds like tiny deer's feet on the smooth grey twigs; I love the zingy green and copper fireworks of the flowers in spring, the airy, open trellis of the branches, the dappling of the little fish leaves. The filtering light of them.

But in nature, and in our human ingenuity and will, there is always hope. We can expect to lose around 80% of our ash trees, but not all. Much research is being done to find, map and breed from disease resistant trees. Our World Tree, our Tree of Life is dying. But still yet, there is hope of new shoots.

NOVEMBER 1, 2020

Fallow Bucks, Chalk Scree.



I haven't been able to put my fieldcraft into action much in recent weeks. But I'm making up for it now. I'm off to the gap on the downs that lies between two blocks of woodland – where there are fallow deer.

The high slope falls away steeply with far-reaching views of autumnal farmland. At what must be an almost 45 degree angle in places, the hill is treacherous to walk down. Close to the fence, it's a skid over chalk scree nuggets that roll underfoot like acorns. On the open down, thick, fragrant grassland helps both the staying up, and the falling.

On one side the wood is mostly derelict coppice, with the hazel trees yellowing into fans. I can imagine the coppicers both dreading and relishing the challenge of this wood. How the lactic acid in their calf muscles must have burned, how they'd have laughed at each others' falls, and how injuries from a slip with a billhook or saw in hand would have almost been inevitable.



At intervals, there are tracks where the deer move from one wood to the next, and leap the waist-high fence. The splayed double brackets of their hooves, and the imprint of their fetlock spurs, or 'ergots' are some three metres from the fence and proof of the height they've jumped, and the weight of the animals. I imagine them like steeplechasers.



Horseshoes of earth on the down have been excavated from grassy anthill tumps by partridges and pheasants, to get at the ants and dust bathe. Some of these have been pawed at and enlarged by the bucks. There are droppings, or 'crotties' and not only hoofprints: there are *knee prints* where the animal has knelt, and dents and slices where it has thrashed in testosterone surges at the turf and grass with its antlers.



At the foot of the wood, the light filters through a wild cathedral of tall beeches where the bucks' rutting stands are. Their fading lemon-green leaves are like a brief whiff of spring, before the caramel fire of them is revealed. A strong smell of ammonia reaches me, where the bucks have made their rutting wallows and rolled.



Then a small herd breaks cover from some hawthorn behind me. They cross the gap at a canter, long legs like thoroughbreds, hocks working hard in the long, tussocky grass. A dark chocolate buck leads a harem of three, chestnut-spotted does. He carries his head high, on a level plane with his spine, to manage the heavy, thorny crown of palmate antlers lying along his back. The four duck beneath the laddered platform of a shooting high seat, and jump the fence into the opposite wood. I wonder how the buck does it with his head held so high, but the last I see of them is a dark, upside-down horseshoe on each white rump, kicking up and over the fence like one clean set of heels.



Time is up for me today, but as I climb to leave, in the woods that are below me again, there is the guttural, repeated, belchy sound of a buck and then, unmistakably, in the still air, the clash of antlers, like wood knocking on wood.