

# Nature Notes

OCTOBER 29, 2020

BY NICOLA CHESTER

## *The University of Craneflies.*



The fast, busy pace of life seems to have returned, when I was determined not to let it. I wanted to keep some of the lockdown simplicity; the time to *notice* and not let time run on so quickly, like grain through my fingers. Yet, before we know it, we are packing the car full of my son's things for University – relieved we can get him there at all.

It is an idyllic place to study – and the excitement of all those bright, young, hopeful souls, finally released (albeit, only a little) into their future is palpable. There is a lake with resident kingfishers and traveling otters, a walled garden and, although my son shakes his head wryly, as we bump over an all-too-familiar cattle grid and are held up by the shepherd moving his sheep (as we were when we left home) I know he'll love it. And a city full of urban edginess, culture, diversity and opportunity is only a short bus ride away.



Back home, I find connections that link us. The winter gulls that fly home to roost each night, lifting the sunset from the west country on their wings, follow The Wansdyke. An ancient path and boundary that sits under our home hill – and his new one. If he needed to, he'd have no trouble walking it home. The last, late wasps riot inside an apple left on the tree. It buzzes softly with the bass of his guitar and amp, that no longer reverberates through the house.



But the insects of the moment are craneflies, their summer's-end appearance, gold-lit by the post-harvest sun, as predictable as that of house spiders.

They are strangely beautiful, with something of the sad carnival elephant in their ponderous framework. They feel their way uncertainly, abseiling walls as if they are trying to push off into the wider airspace without succeeding, sailing their six, difficult, tentpole legs on inadequate, gauzy wings.



I have so much writing to do and they come to the light of the laptop, late at night, reaching out like weak swimmers for its flat, blue, swimming-pool screen. And they buzz and knock against the lampshade when I am making notes. When they brush my cheek in the darkened bedroom (light as a child's breath on your face before waking) they are not unwelcome.



In the morning, the brevity of their lives is evident, wrapped in the inverted tents of spider webs, like blown over, collapsed marquees. Their basket of legs are folded in neatly, like a prayer to a job done, like the filament of a lightbulb at the centre of the gauzy cradles. Discarded wings and legs lie on the window ledge like sentences edited out. Some kind of cutting room floor.



He texts to ask about cooking pasta, recommends some new bands, tells me about new mates, ends with the spotting of a barn owl and the words, 'it's crane-fly season, Mum!' He notices.



OCTOBER 4, 2020

***There is a Little of Spring in Autumn.***



On the last day of the strangest school holidays ever, the oats are being brought in from Home Field. Across the lane, fields of late-grown seed hay are being teded; turned, woofed, floofed and dried before being teddered again into windrows and baled. The warm, biscuity scent from the thick, strewn mattress of grass mingles with the smell of ivy flowers. It's at once fresh & nostalgic, like spring in autumn.



I've been reading about a woman who farmed these fields in the 1940s and took the almost derelict Manor Farm from horse to tractor power. It was necessary, gruelling work, with little manpower, no running water, sanitation or electricity – but plenty of support and camaraderie. The effort it took getting the reaper binder to work or the threshing machine and its eight human attendants to the fields is humbling.



I am beguiled & haunted by past, indomitable, local women farmers at the moment. In the historical section of my local paper, was a latterday Bathsheba Everdene; a lone *woman* selling her harvest in The Corn Exchange, in 1920, resplendent & remarked upon, not for her corn, but her smock & her billycock hat. And then there is Honor Atkins of Enborne, Miss Mason and Miss de Beaumont of Shalbourne and Miss Boston & Miss Hargreaves of Starlight Farm, Lambourn (immortalised in Rachel Malik's brilliant book.)



A young buzzard quarters the field, mewing and picked on by jackdaws until it learns, with feints, foils and baffles, to shake them off. There is a flattened straw, shellac gleam from the underside of its wings, a flash of mother-of-pearl.

A feather from its parent lies along some sort of dividing line between the wilder land & the farmed. The buzzard that moulted this feather makes no such distinction. Owns none of it, belongs to it all. She raised her fledglings through lockdown in the usual nest, near the eye-gap in the canopy of Nightingales Wood.



From there, a reverb, an echo of March: a little over-the-shoulder reprise of spring amongst the autumn clatter of farm machinery and acorns falling through branches. There is always the last breath of spring in autumn somehow. A willow warbler subsong drops in to my consciousness, as if I'd forgotten its daily musicality already; all the notes, softer and in mild, self-conscious disarray: an after-party lilt, the punchline of the last joke told, repeated to itself, a little tired now, heading inexorably home through the country, south.

And then in the strange, grey, heavy weather, I hear the sudden clarity of the village church bells; only ever heard faintly here, but unmistakable, they grow loud and pass in a pocket of air, travelling as if in a bubble blown from a bubble wand. As if an ice cream van has gone by. What strange alchemy is this?



Later, a warm whisk of a wind blows chaff dust through the open door of my hut. I am wearing a crown of crane flies that are reading my face and laptop screen like braille, with their tentpole legs & long, sad, horse faces. It should be Harvest Festival time. Newbury Agricultural Show time. All is out of kilter.

