

Sonnets for the Woodland Trust / Charter for Trees, Woods and People 2017

January: Bend with the wind

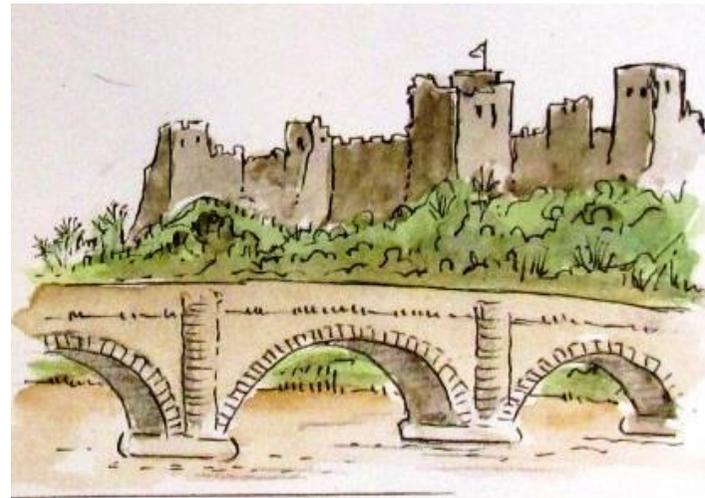
The birches on the ridge are sleeping now,
Though hibernation is a better word.
They need their rest as much as you or I,
Conserving strength so with spring the growth
Begins again, inexorable and slow -
But powerful. Leaves that were jettisoned
Months ago still showing here and there on
Cold soil. However hard the storms of winter blow,
The wind will find no purchase. It's like a ship
Whose captain knows what's coming, furls the sails
And weathers out the worst. Alike with snow
Which finds no leaves to rest on - and so
The birches are prepared for winter gales;
They bend with the wind, not to give in
But to spring back again: worth remembering,

March: Together we walked by the banks of the Teme

Together we walked by the banks of the Teme
And the water *did* teem and dash by our side!
The last day's rain when the heavens had cried
Like a child, unable to pause, fed the streams,
Caused the river to rush on as if late
For a pressing engagement. We nearly missed
On our right, the sight of the trunk, the twists
Of its roots, gnarled hands grasping like a great
Giant's claws the rock and the stone of the cliff.
We were awed by the sheer strength of its grip:
How it held on like a sailor to the ship's
Rail in a storm, sure of its hold as if
Nothing could shock it or rock it. So seemed
This ancient tree on the banks of the Teme.

February: Offa's Land

Offa's land, the country of the Marches
Is rich in hillside, field and tree,
The landscape stitched together quietly
By lines of hedgerows and the odd stretch
Of wooden fence, and hemmed by ditch and track.
Over the next rise, this garment's torn:
The fabric's lost its sheen, is all worn
Out - punctured by agricultural sheds and shacks.
But beyond, there on the hillside just above,
A stand of leafless trees rescues the scene:
Leafless but by no means lifeless. Though green
Shoots are some way off, there's love
Of life regrouping here, ready to show
Itself as soon as Spring says, 'OK! Green for Go!'





April: The Tranby Oaks

This is the story of the Tranby Oaks,
Which grew from the seeds they took from their trees:
With acorns in their baggage as they went to sea,
The young and the old, York and Lincoln folks
With hope in their pockets and a shilling or two.

In Australia, the 'Tranby' set them ashore
Where they planted their seeds and acorns galore
Which fell on good ground and prospered and grew.

And great oaks thrived as the decades went past;
So its acorns were gathered and then were sent out
Back to England where seedlings could once again sprout
Until saplings were ready to plant out at last.

Now the grandchildren of those original trees
Can shiver once more in a chill North Sea breeze!

May: A Cruel kind of love

In France, the love affair is clear to see:
Visible from highway or from lane,
There is a strong relationship with trees.
From the beech and cypress to the plane
Trees of the South, roads become avenues
And city streets transformed to boulevards.
These spinneys, woods and forests all form views
Which could be custom-made for our postcards.
But in many a town, along the streets,
The branches have been pruned back to the trunks,
Limbs lopped off, resulting in some neat
But amputated stumps. All beauty shrunk
To regulated columns – few leaves above...
Mes amis, this seems a cruel kind of love.





June: Pear and Rose

Of all our garden trees the pear is oldest
And though the fruits are usually small and hard,
They fall with brutal force. Their brown scarred
Shapes litter the lawn until they're swept
Onto the borders, there to decompose
And plough some goodness back into the earth.
It's a playground for the sparrows, and its girth
Supports something of greater worth: a rose.

Beside the ancient trunk, now fully grown,
A rambling rose, American Pillar,
Is established well, its tendrils clambering far
Up through the staid old tree - and now, in June,
Its glowing polkadot blossoms seem
Like crimson constellations in a sky of green.

July: Thoughts from a garden hammock

My hammock hangs between aspen and holly;
The holly has been here for many years,
Who knows the number? But the aspen tree,
Planted some 30 years ago: I fear
We knew so little about trees back then.
It was just a lucky choice. It survived
Both drought and flood – and our ignorance
And with roots well set, it thickened up and thrived.
There it is. The sound of its leaves like rain
As summer breezes lift and leave its boughs,
And is “The bustling noise that oft deceives,
The sound so mimics fast approaching showers.”*
And in autumn, the colours of those fallen leaves
Make a mosaic that I try to paint in vain.

* from John Clare's 'Summer Images'



August: Wind, Rain and Sun

It's not just the willow that is weeping
Now that the Scottish rain seems to be set in
The birch, the hazel and the pine are getting
Their share of the downpour. They're keeping
Quiet, though, with just a wet dog shake
Now and then, surprising us with weightier,
Wetter drops – as if they lay in wait for
Unsuspecting townsfolk they could make
Fun of.

Then, as suddenly as it began,
It stops. For a moment all is still.
And then, as if sounding the 'all clear',
A blackbird trills, and just above, quite near,
Another song we think must be a robin, till
The air is full of farewells to the rain.



September: Crab apple tree

Spring's the time for the crab apple's finery:
It covers itself in a frock of pink
That heralds lighter mornings, makes you think
Of warmer days. Then as the flowers decline
And fall upon the path, it takes a back seat
To other burgeoning bushes, trees and plants,
Biding its time, drawing strength and sustenance
In preparation for September's treat.
It seems each year we're taken by surprise
As, looking up, we see those once small dots
Have become full round red fruit – and lots
Of them! A crimson firework in a green sky
Caught freeze-frame. Enjoy them while you may
Before October's winds enter the fray!

October: Ode to an Arborist

The elder is surveyed with practised eyes
Likewise the old pear tree, now ivy clad,
And the bay that's getting out of hand.
The ornamental cherry wasn't wisely
Pruned last time. We need a better man;
Someone with a sympathy for trees,
Not just a lopper with a saw who sees
The easiest way, who doesn't understand
There's more to it than letting in some light
Or cutting back from cables overhead.
So, now the elder and the pear have shed
Some surplus boughs, the bay tree seems right
And all the rest are trimmed harmoniously.
If this were Wales we'd call him Lee the Tree.



November: Autumn Colour

Rising and falling like a quiet fairground ride
Vistas to both east and west, each side
A panorama constantly renewed,
The highway bends and winds, each view
A fresh photo opportunity
Taken or resisted. Close up, each tree
A kind of flower, a red hot poker,
Or a frozen firework, showering orange ochre.
No photograph does justice to these scenes
Which need a Turner or a Monet, keen
To fix, however fleetingly, the hues
Which subtly alter as clouds close or part; scenes whose
Images we'll return to, try to retain,
Knowing we're unlikely to be here again.



December: Burton Agnes Hall

The tree at Burton Agnes sure is big:
A giant of a fir, it reaches from floor
Almost to the ceiling of the hall,
Making our tree look more like a twig.
To bring it from the woods indoors
Needs many hands to lift and haul. They all
Put their shoulders to the wheel: sixteen
Of them, in fact, avoiding ancient
Panelling and doorcases, they bent
Their backs with a will. It would be a scene
To remember well into cold New Year.
Now, decked with decorations high and low
And beaming out its message loud and clear,
It greets as you enter, cheers you as you go.

<https://tinyurl.com/y759h8ts>

All sonnets © Trevor Millum 2017-18

We raised £1,700 for the Charter thanks to the support of over fifty sponsors.

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