

Art and Spiritual Understanding

Final presentation from Christine De Luca, poet and practitioner

'Fine art is that in which the hand, the head and the heart of man go together.'

John Ruskin

This is a report of an experiential approach to exploring the interrelationship of the arts and spiritual understanding or 'spiritual reality'. The specific context is a garden; and the medium is a collaboration between poet (myself) and visual artist (Brigid Collins). By way of testing this approach, we asked the University Chaplain, Kitty Wheeler, to reflect on our work.

My main project outputs are:

- a film introducing the collaborative work between myself (as poet) and the artist Brigid Collins in the context of Dr Neil's Garden, Duddingston;
- a series of ekphrastic poems written in response to Brigid's drawings and paintings of the plants and plant communities; poems which necessarily also reflect my own response to the garden. A brief commentary introduces each section. I am indebted to Brigid Collins for allowing me to include her artwork, without which the poems would be less effective;
- Reflections on our collaborative work, written by Kitty Whitear, a Chaplain at the University of Edinburgh.

I am also hugely indebted to the Gardener, Claudia Pottier. Her willingness to share her knowledge and to extend a gracious welcome greatly enhanced the experience of being in Dr Neil's Garden.

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Art and Spiritual Understanding

Christine De Luca, poet and practitioner

1 Introduction: 'spiritual reality' – a somewhat 'slippery' concept

Over the centuries *spiritual* experiences have been closely associated with *religious* experiences, typically occurring in places of pilgrimage or sacred spaces designed with devotional intent. Architectural characteristics and the use of decorative features such as stained glass have typically been used to create a sense of reverence and stillness. To enhance such awareness, and perhaps lead to spiritual or religious understanding – to appeal to the mind as well as the emotions – other features were necessary: theological exposition and engagement, poetic liturgy, religious iconography and art, sacred music and so on.

However, in what is becoming an ever more secular western society, many people no longer have a religious affiliation or practice. While interest has been retained in religious symbols – music, icons, candles, statuary, art, furnishings, meditation, pilgrimage – they appear to have been largely stripped of their deeper religious significance. But, commenting on the work of Don Cupitt in the context of the increasing creation of ephemeral 'shrines' of flowers and candles as part of public mourning, the theologian John Drane writes:

*'whereas some Christians might regard it as "the secularisation of religion" (wrongly in my opinion), it could just as easily be regarded as "the sacrilization of life".'*¹

Along with this decline in church attendance, religious interpretations of the relationship of mankind to the natural environment – man as steward of a world created by God – have largely been overtaken by a sense that what is needed is a more direct experience of the natural world – a person-centred 'lifestyle' of fitness and well-being enjoyed in the cathedral of the great outdoors.

However, despite this decline in the west in formal religious affiliation and its associated concepts and vocabulary, many people still have a real sense of spiritual experience, something recognised as well beyond the physical or mental: something 'that stops them in their tracks' rather than merely delights. It could be that sense of 'being in the moment', a moment of transcendent beauty or profound clarity, when time momentarily seems to stop and one senses the experience is life-enhancing and possibly somewhat life-changing. It could be a deep sense of gratitude; or perhaps an experience which calms our inner being and helps us struggle on. The more typical contexts for 'spiritual' experience might now be the concert hall or the art gallery or, for many, the natural world. Words like 'awe' and 'wonder' and 'communing' with nature are hallmarks of this experience. But, like the writer Helen Macdonald, so often people find themselves without words to express these significant moments:

*"I kept trying to find the right words to describe certain experiences and failing. My secular lexicon didn't capture what they were like. You've probably had such experiences yourself – times in which the world stutters, turns and fills with unexpected meaning."*²

It is also the case that artistic works created with no explicit religious intent can elicit a profoundly spiritual response, a sense of the sublime. For example, the compositions of a creative genius,

¹ Drane, J, *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual?* Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, London, 2005, pp 61-2

² Macdonald, H, *Vesper Flights*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2020 (in 'The Numinous Ordinary')

irrespective of his/her beliefs, have the potential to take us 'beyond' ourselves, eliciting something more like cosmic awareness or transcendence; as much as, say, a piece by Bach or Messiaen.

2 What might poetry achieve in such a context?

Poetry has a special place in the sacred texts of many of the world's oldest religions. Perhaps that made the words more memorable for largely non-literate cultures. The art of poetry is not just about structure and sound pattern, but also how we perceive the world. Through image and metaphor the poet pushes the boundaries of language, comes at ideas in more tangential and unexpected ways. It is well suited to the area where the material world, empirical evidence and rational, deductive thought give way in the face of mystery and wonder. Indeed the arts in general have much to contribute to a holistic approach rather than a more reductive approach, more typical of the sciences.

'And then, I have nature and art and poetry and, if that is not enough, what is enough?'

Vincent Van Gogh

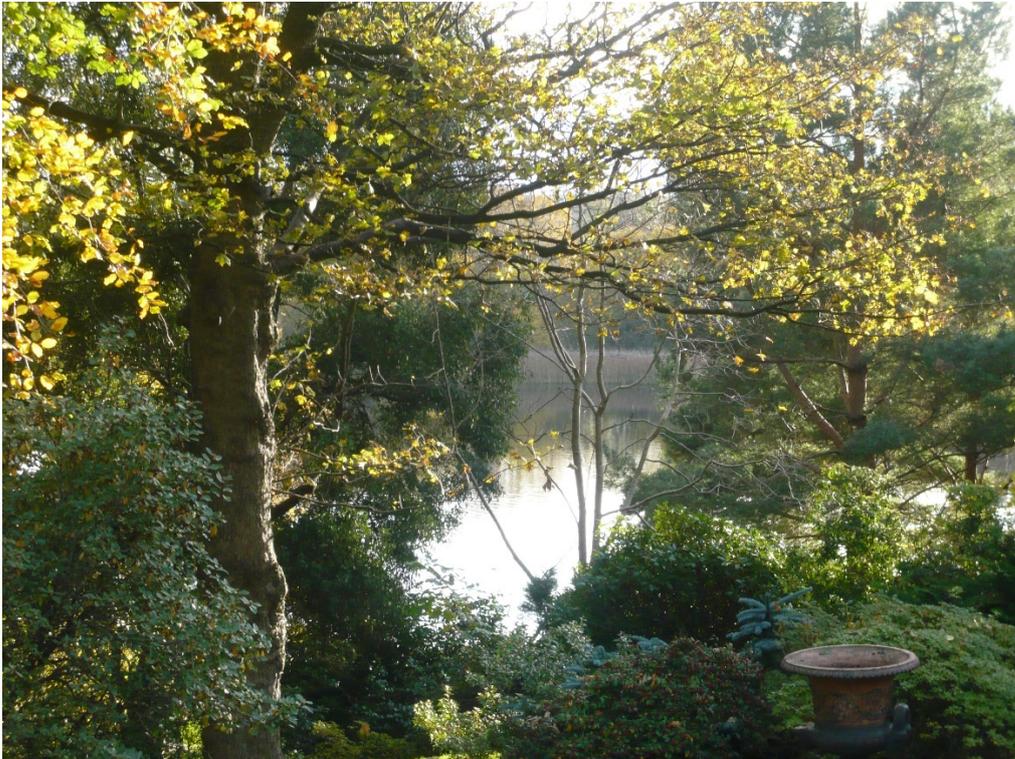
3 Collaborating with the artist Brigid Collins in Dr Neil's Garden

In Summer 2021 the visual artist, Brigid Collins, and I started working together in the context of Dr Neil's Garden in Duddingston, Edinburgh, where she was Artist-in-Residence. We both felt that our work could be complementary and thus perhaps greater than the sum of the constituent parts. At that time we had no particular intention of exploring spiritual matters. But neither was our intention to create botanical illustration and descriptive poetry. As time went on, we sensed a deeper engagement with the natural world, realising that our collaboration could have a contemplative dimension. Perhaps we could create something to help others experience what we were experiencing; that dusting off of the eyes allowing us to see more deeply, and to feel a sense of a spiritual as much as a physical reality. We were both willing to give time to this process: as Rowan Williams stated in a recent lecture on the Visual Arts:

'Art has a lot to do with time-taking for humans; we grow into our seeing. Epiphany is about acquiring habits of seeing differently, of taking time. It is not a lightning raid on the world but something to probe.' (New College Festival of Books and Religion, November 2022)

In my case, I soon realised this was an extension of previous work I had enjoyed – writing ekphrastic poems responding to particular artists ranging from Giotto and Michelangelo to Eduardo Paolozzi and Victoria Crowe. I had found much of spiritual significance to contemplate in their work. This was particularly profound when I could discuss the work with the artist, as in the case of Victoria Crowe. I had already shared some of these poems with the *Art and Spiritual Understanding* project team and it was agreed that the work I was doing with Brigid would be a useful context for exploring these deeper meanings.

Dr Neil's Garden in Duddingston is something of an oasis in the heart of the City of Edinburgh. It was created in the 1960s by the Neils, both local GPs, as a space where they encouraged their patients to help with gardening tasks or just to relax and find healing of body, mind and spirit in peaceful and beautiful surroundings. It lies on the rugged lower slopes of Arthur's Seat, between Duddingston Kirk (dating from the 12th century) and Duddingston Loch. The garden continues to be tended devotedly and knowledgeably but is not manicured. A physic garden was later developed to commemorate the Neils.



We started by simply spending time in the garden, often together, looking and learning.

"The most precious gift we can offer is our attention" Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk

"Attention is the beginning of devotion" Mary Oliver, poet

Brigid spent many hours drawing and painting in all weathers and sharing her work with me. Occasionally a poem of mine would spur her to paint a particular plant but generally her work was the stimulus for my poems. Such is the nature of ekphrasis.

From Reflection, Introduction, by Kitty Wheeler

Artist Brigid Collins and poet Christine De Luca have a key question: 'Can artistic practice – product or process – reveal spiritual reality?' My answer begins with an exploration of 'spiritual reality'. In my time with Brigid and Christine in Dr Neil's Garden, poring over paintings, pastels, and poems, artist and poet described their own sense of its quality: that which is transformative, revelatory, and insightful. These are qualities which imply movement and change. In so doing, they depend in turn on the sense of what is perhaps an unspiritual reality; the state from which one shifts. This begs further questions as to the nature of that shift, and what it is one shifts to. My reflections stem from observing both artistic product – artwork and poems – and process. The latter is many-layered. In Brigid and Christine's work, there were conversations that took place between artist and poet, but also between both and the garden. The shift I observe is, as both artist and poet posit, from separation to mutuality; but what I will draw out too is the ways in which that mutuality retains vital distinctions between plants, between plants and humans, and between garden and representation. It is in this mutual distinctiveness, a fractal configuration of connection and distinction, that we find a certain kind of spiritual reality: a sacred geometry sensed only by those who seek.

There follows a series of poems and paintings (3.1 – 3.12) exploring a range of ideas but which all involve a sense of gratitude. We learned so much in the garden, all of which increased our appreciation of the natural world, and our place in it. Deeply focused as we were on the loveliness all around us, and insulated for a short while from the barrage of news and views, perhaps we were momentarily in a state of grace.

“... it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

3.1 *Appreciation of wonder*

One of the earliest studies Brigid did was in relation to some dog roses I saw swaying in the breeze, perfuming the air on a sunny day. This stopped me in my tracks: transience and marvellousness. When I further contemplated how we see what is in front of our eyes – in this case wild roses – and the complexities of both the quantum physics of matter and the optics involved, I could not but experience a sense of wonder. And yet, a blind person can appreciate so much from perhaps just the perfume. Memory too is powerful as it recreates earlier associations, as this poem also suggests.

Quantum sufficit

A sufficient quantity

The atoms of the wild rose petals
dance before the eye, create
a heart-shape in the mind, and with
the merging of two such probabilities
(where is the eye? where is the rose?)
decide they like the certainty
the rose brings to the blind.

Sufficient in size is the tiny wild rose
sufficient in staying power: a day
a transience. And the perfume
whose secret atoms break all bounds
all probabilities, conjures a presence.



3.2 *Appreciation of Peace*

The lochside in summer exudes a deep sense of peace. These tall grasses with their gorgeous bells, appropriately called 'Angels' Fishing Rods', also reminded me of the grace of dancers or perhaps a mobile over a cradle to soothe a baby... hence the title of the poem. We live through a time of great upheaval and these oases are ever more necessary to calm us and restore our sense of well-being.

Lull

Dierama pulcherrimum

There's something of the *corps de ballet* about these grasses. Is it the way they drape, hold themselves with a lithe grace, trip in, stage-left, wave on floaty wave, arrayed in dresses, petunia and cerise fading, crêpe-thin, to fuchsia?

But that's fanciful: it's just a breeze off the loch that sets the slender stem aswing: a mobile over a ferny cradle, rocking gently. 'Hark, what peaceful music rings.'

(From *Jesu, joy of man's desiring*, by J S Bach, translated by Robert Bridges)



3.3 *Appreciation of how plants thrive best*

As gardeners we tend to trim, prune and separate, putting emphasis on our aesthetic sensibilities rather than on what the plants might prefer. We like our specimen bushes to be in the 'right' place visually. But as we observed the plants more closely in the garden and learned more about them, we came to appreciate that while, at a cursory glance, they may appear a little untidy, they are thriving harmoniously together. They seem to have developed a comfortable mutuality, a reciprocity, supporting one another in several different ways, as the poem 'Conversation' suggests. This poem was written at the time of the major Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in 2021 (COP 26). The poem 'Symbiosis' has a similar feel. We had moved on from looking at individual plants to seeing them in community; to a sense of humility in the presence of the plant kingdom. While, initially, we may have been startled by the beauty of a tree bark or a flower or leaf pattern, we had quickly realised that it was not all about conventional 'beauty'.

'The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things but their inward significance'
Aristotle

Conversation *during COP 26*

It is late in the season, and the conversation
between hop and ginkgo and wild rose is
of mutual things; chatter of shade, support, stability;
of insects, nutrients, water. Braided through
leaves and stems, messages touch deeply, rouse
fungal chums. What such sweet fankle offers.

They are charmed that the artist has picked
them out, detected their communion.
She is part of them now, her face pixelated
in green, her ankles festooned in their tousle.
They paint themselves on her white paper,
make their marks in the long light of afternoon.



From Reflection, Plant and Plant, by Kitty Wheeler

How to capture that mutuality and togetherness? In Christine's 'Conversation', the metaphor of speech finds its apogee: 'the conversation / between hop and gingko and wild rose is / of mutual things; chatter of shade, support, stability; / of drowsy bees; of nutrients, water'. But the 'whisperings' and 'lip-reading' between plants that we find in Christine's poems point to something just outside the range of human ears. 'Messages touch deeply,' she writes, and in the sensory 'touch', not 'hear', we sense the ways in which plants speak to each other beyond human notions of speech and talk. In her imagery elsewhere, she describes how plants are 'a corps de ballet' – they 'trip in, stage-left, wave on floaty wave'; dance discloses the physicality to their mutuality.

In moving between metaphors, Christine shows that neither the language of 'conversation', nor 'dance', nor even perhaps both, can ever quite capture what it is that happens between plants. She both ushers us towards mutual relating to plants – they are like us; their communings are like human forms – and gently holds us back. If they speak a language at all, it is one that we don't speak. And Brigid too, in her beautiful pastel tangle of 'Sharing Space', reminds us that in the moment of artistic viewing, this is a space that I – the onlooker – do not quite share...

... Through Brigid and Christine's artistic care and attention, we move closer to the plants of Dr Neil's Garden; and in that very movement, we sense more deeply the space between us. This is a sober understanding, something rather beautiful, because it is born of care. It is not the casual sense of human superiority and separation. Rather, distinctiveness is itself reconstituted – and that is the gift of Brigid and Christine's evocation of mutuality. As Christine herself wrote, it is a message that touches deeply indeed. For the viewer-reader, we know not whether to rejoice or mourn. Maybe both; maybe that is just how it should be.

From Reflection, Plant and Artists, by Kitty Wheeler

Accompanying the poem 'Conversation', there is a photograph of Brigid painting in the garden. She looks intently not at the photographer, but out into the green, paintbrush poised in hand. From this distance, we can see green shadows falling across her paper, yet we cannot see the painting itself. The photograph is a portrait of something intimate in motion, occurring between plants and artist, snapped in a moment. The portrait speaks for itself; in a way, we need not even see the painting. Yet when we do, it makes perfect sense: for the shadows are replicated in perfect pools and stripes across the paper, accentuating the colours of wild rose leaves in green and brown, its hips in flaming orange and red. This is not just a painting of hop and gingko and wild rose, but a painting of what it is for the artist under leaf and bough to paint hop and gingko and wild rose. To the viewer it is a gift, because it permits us a glimpse of that mutuality, with all its intimacy.

And the poet sees it, too. The plants 'are charmed that the artist has picked / them out, spotted their communion,' Christine writes. Others might not have done so, she implies. We sense how poet bears witness to artist, bearing

witness to plants: a recursive mutual honouring, a making and merging of space. It is in words that Christine captures how the plants, too, are painters. It is not just the artist painting green shadows; it is the plants that 'paint themselves on her white paper, / make their marks in the long light of afternoon'. Meanwhile, the artist – 'She is part of them now' – has become of plant-like stuff, 'her face pixelated / in green, her ankles festooned in their tousel'. As painter and painted reach towards each other, picked out and tousled, pixelated and festooned, the art, Christine seems to tell us, emerges from the space in-between.

In these works, a new mutuality is brought to our attention beyond the mutuality between plants. We sense how artistic process itself is one of opening, a willingness both to mark and be marked. The marking and being marked are different from one another not only in direction but also in kind. There is an intentionality to Brigid's gaze, to the artistic honouring through watercolour shadow, to Christine's attentive capturing of plant-like chatter. And yet just as the relationship among plants recedes from our human notions of 'conversation', so too the work of plants upon artists recedes from human-like intentionality. For all that the plants festoon Brigid's ankles, and pixelate her face, it is through shadow that they 'make their marks in the long light of afternoon': they are one step removed from the painting itself, and if their mark is to endure, it's the artist who must capture it.

It is a removal that exposes both the wondrous nature of the plant world and its vulnerability. For all its tousled tendrils around the feet of the artist, when she leaves, it will remain; and we can't help but wonder how she will extract herself: what shoot will bruise, or leaf-blade snap? In our wondering there is care and attention; there is reverence for the unknowable beings that artist and poet seek to capture, and humility and tenderness for the artistic will that reveals this landscape of spirit and earth for those who seek. Once again, we find that mutuality in the garden is not a blurring, nor sentimental dissolution. It contains vistas and distinctions, and in those, we sense the more acutely what is plant and what is human. The acuity moves and grounds us, at the same time. It is a revelation, and in that comes relief.

"We only work to save what we first love. Poems muster awareness, not action..."

Jane Hirshfield, poet

Symbiosis

Weeping birch and friends

You've been here
at the loch edge long enough
to gnarl and twist, branch out a bit.

You are hospitable
to crusty lichen gilding your branches,
to reeds that make music with you
when the wind rises.

You soothe
the solace-seeker, delight in whispering
companions, excite the dogweed
that blazes in your shade.

The cherry has lost
its calendar, paints you an early Spring.
What a picture you make
growing ever more together.



3.4 *Awareness of the complex harmonies in the natural world: symbiotic relationships*

Some plants live in harmony with particular insects, often to their mutual advantage or, at the very least, with no harm to the host plant. The moss gall (or Robin's Pincushion) on the old dog rose is an example of this. Nor do we know what remedies are still to be discovered in the unlikeliest of plants.

Robin's pincushion

Moss Gall

Past

When shrivelled up in summer
moss galls were squirrelled under pillows
to summon sleep, hung round necks
to ease rheumatics, tucked
in coat-cuffs to avoid a flogging.

Present

A wily wasp can trick a thicket rose
to grow that gall to house its offspring:
a shady larder to see them through the seasons,
from eggs to larvae – a prickly pompom
pulsing with pupae, their swinging cradle.

That bright-eyed robin: is he biding his time,
counting the months: hoar frost on fir, perfume
of viburnum, May buds on the old rose till,
at last, he will dart as wasps emerge, unfold
wings, depart, take flight across the loch?

Future

It's a struggle to like the wasp, despite
all that pollinating, useful foraging.
But who knows what gifts, what remedies
might languish in such oddball chemistry;
in such harmonious entanglements?



3.5 *Appreciation of 'weeds'*

Some of the less showy plants have, when we attend to them, much to admire. It might be in the serration of the leaves, the shades within a single leaf or we learn that it has medicinal properties or is particularly attractive to pollinating insects. Some we might consider a 'weed', such as the Marsh Woundwort, and not expect to see it in a garden. These distinctions are somewhat arbitrary.

Frush

Marsh Woundwort

We could easily pass it by, write it off as no more than a nettle, apt to spread where it's damp; but up close that *frush* of leaves is worth the wonder, their tinge of blue and soft, darkly serrated fringes.

We smudge woundwort and a faint aroma lingers, medicinal from antiquity (or a spell against witches).

It thrusts tall spears to the light. Heads are heavy with tiny florets – each sticking out its tongue to make a landing strip for a bumblebee blundering upon it. How the dog rose dips to greet, to dangle and mingle.

Frush – a profusion (*Shetlandic*)



The Rose-bay Willow Herb too is often considered a weed, dominating poor soils on waste ground. Its seeds blow into Dr Neil's Garden from nearby Arthur's Seat, where it grows profusely. In the garden it is not treated as an outcast, but allowed a space too.

Cross-my-heart

Rose-bay Willow Herb on Arthur's Seat

Terraces on the south slopes of the hill
are a July sensation; have slipped from
ancient cultivation to the lazy sway
of Rose-bay willow herb. Call it Fireweed

but there's perfection in its symmetry:
each floret a sashay of four fat petals held
by four magenta strips. Its stamen,
split four ways, projects itself proudly

in a shimmy of wispy attendants
bearing eight seeds, gold-dipped.

There must be millions billowing away,
pink weeds on a warm wind.



3.6 *Appreciation of the incomer: making room for the non-indigenous*

While we were working in the garden environment we came to realise how welcoming it was to immigrant communities: to asylum seekers and other groups often housed in less than ideal conditions and who can perhaps feel socially isolated.

Dr Neil's is a blend of indigenous and non-indigenous plants, living together harmoniously: two examples of the latter are the Chinese red birch and the magnolia. There is grace in these forms of welcome.

Sharing space

Chinese Red Birch

Your name is misleading or perhaps
you're keen to fit in with the locals,
not stick out like a specimen, nurtured
and exotic. Your winter trunk gives
little away; it's almost as silvered as
local birches, though there's a hint of pink.

Wind-wrapped in willow fronds, it seems
you've happily bedded in; found
your feet eased in the damp grasses,
caught their whisperings, their welcome.

In Spring you will delight them with
bright leaves and catkins; then peel back
that bark to spice up summer.



From Reflection. Plant and Plant, by Kitty Wheeler

In the shelter in Dr Neil's Garden, Brigid shows me how her residence in the garden has changed the way she paints. She began by drawing specimens, single plants, but the singularity of that artistic gaze soon changed. I am drawn to 'Sharing Space', Brigid's pastel of Chinese red birch and willow fronds, for its fine bright lines of willow fronds and the pearly glow of birch bark behind. At the end of her residency, Brigid has found herself drawing plants together: the birch and the willow and the grasses; what humans might, in our unreflective moments, call 'messy' or 'weedy' or 'wild'. But *look closer*, 'Sharing Space' seems to say, and so I do. It is a beautiful tangle in its greens and whites, and I feel, as I observe it, both its invitation and its secrets: this is a tangle that does not include me.

For this is a mutuality between plants. It has nothing to do with me, and yet Brigid can draw it, and I can see it. Plants are finding their own way together. Upon sight of mess or tangle we have a choice: our eyes might skate over it, or we might look deeper. That is what Christine does in her accompanying poem, and here is what she finds: a mutuality that contains both distinctiveness and belonging. 'You're keen to fit in with the locals, / not stick out like a specimen,' Christine addresses the birch. It's telling, because there is still the possibility of specimen-ship: a Chinese red birch is, after all, always going to be a Chinese red birch, and not a willow. Yet, 'wind-wrapped in willow fronds, it seems / you've happily bedded in; found / your feet eased in the damp grasses'. These plants are distinct from one another, but can also find, together, comfort and delight.

The pleasing shock of the exotic

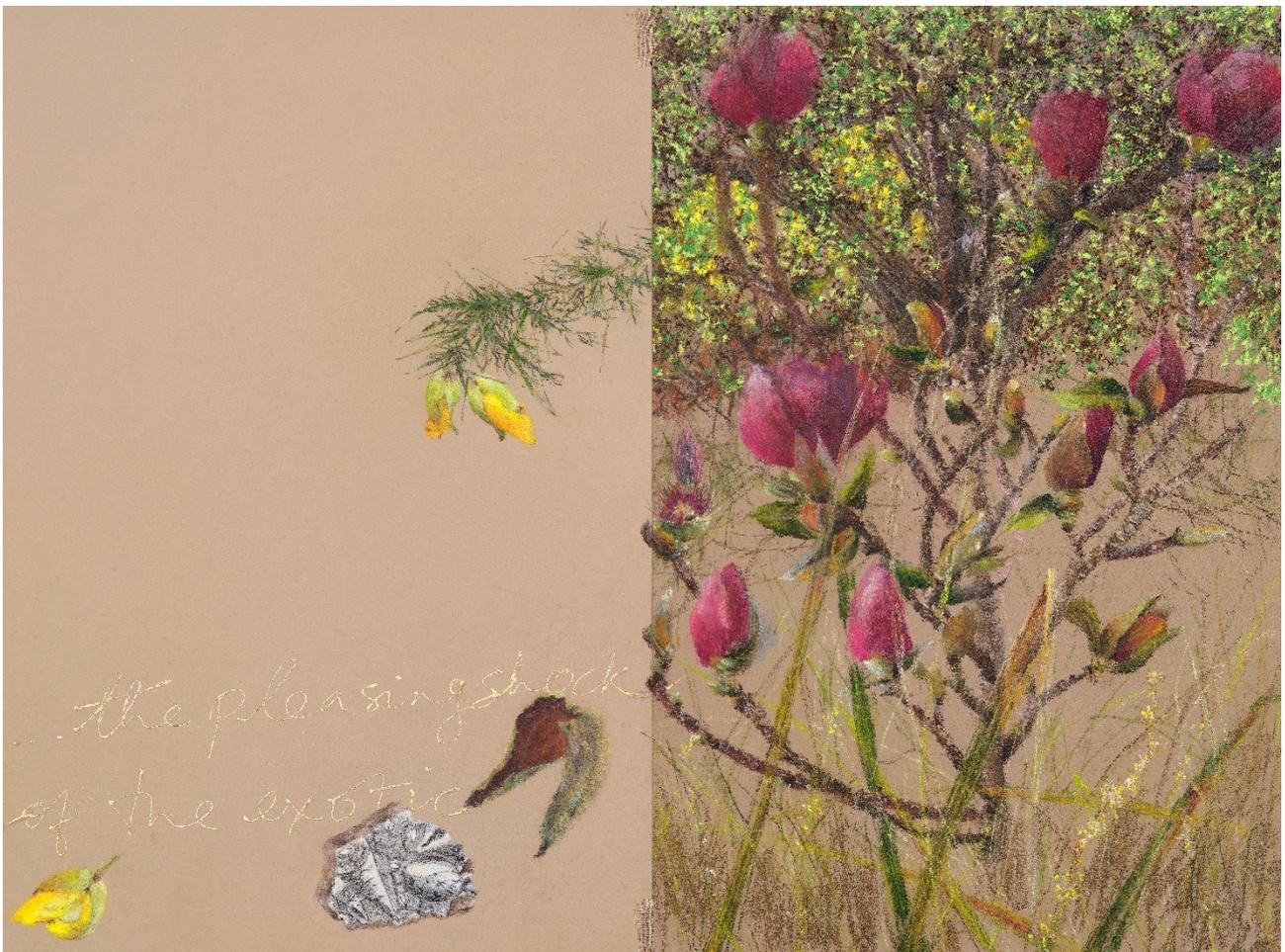
Magnolia against Crow Hill

You waken to our Scottish Spring, bringing,
as if from another world, the pleasing shock
of the exotic. All that inner life, that innate energy:

furred buds that peel back revealing waxy goblets:
a panoply, an oriental lusciousness that teases
the arms of that old elm, chides its slow progress to

tasselled glory. As you open and the sun picks you out,
you brighten haunts, flourish and flaunt.
Do you dim to candle light in the dark?

These grasses too have come a distance, fitted in,
acclimatised to our ways. They enliven the garden,
soften the line of Crow Hill that will only offer gorse.



3.7 *Appreciation of animal, vegetable, mineral and fungal harmony*

We became ever more appreciative of the intricate inter-relationships of insects, plants and soil: animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms; and, perhaps a little later, the complex world of fungi.

Drowning in wonder

Clover

Even if

your pink heads weren't so perfect
or you had no perfume
or little nectar

Even if

you had two leaves
or four
rather than a perfect three

You would still be valuable

for grazing, hay-making
for soil nitrogen, nutrients
for breaking hard-pan clay
for better drainage
for suppressing weeds

If I were a bumblebee

I'd drown in your wonder
pollinate acres



Working in the context of the garden our knowledge was constantly being extended. The more we learned about fungi, the more astounded we were. And their forms have a particular beauty.

No future without fungi

They're beyond our childhood question:
animal, vegetable or mineral? Fungi, their own
myriad world, millions unexplored.

Touch them and they'll send a puff of spores
enough to change our world.
Some seem more like mineral; oyster shells
on some exotic coral. They are mighty underground.

How old is that tree stump they've colonised?
Did they arrive last night or a century ago?
Did the moss consent to this intimate invasion?

Give us a few years and we'll be wearing them,
cured by them, cleansed by them. Meanwhile
we ask, with their spatial memory like a bee,
where are they going? How much do they know?



The fungi growing on the old tree stump in autumn 2021 were, to our amazement, utterly different from the fungi growing there twelve months later (below).



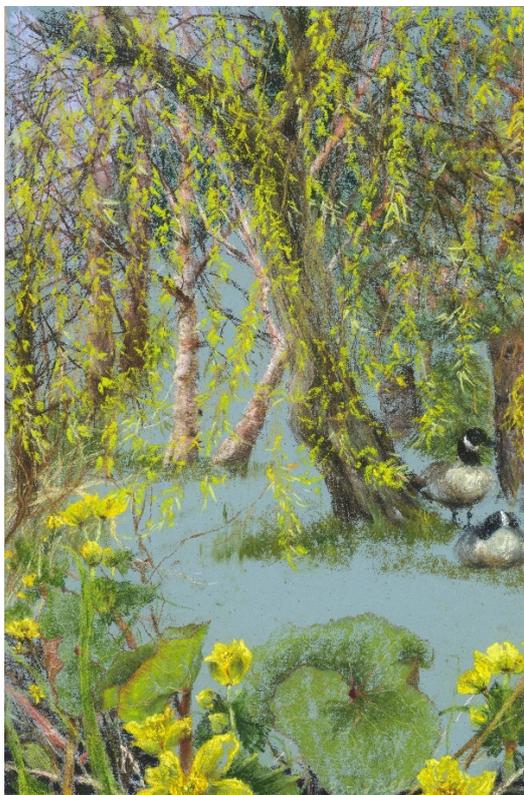
3.8 *Appreciation of birds as an integral part of the garden*

Dr Neil's Garden is full of birdsong, which greatly adds to the experience of being there; even the much despised Canada Geese were welcomed. While green-keepers despair of their golf courses, game-keepers poison birds of prey and we degrade the environments needed for birds to thrive, Dr Neil's garden nurtures a bird-friendly habitat, protecting insect life by a policy of no pesticides. During Spring and early Summer the gardeners even created a safe space for a pair of geese who nested next to a public path. The geese came to accept Brigid's close proximity and, along with the ducks, seemed to enjoy having her around. There was something Edenic in this: our mutual acceptance.

Under the Willow

It is unmistakably Spring, though
the birches are barely budding
and the hawthorn still counting
the days till may-time. It's the willow
that's up and running; its cape draped
in fronds that sway, touch the water.
Low light plays off the loch.

Geese are pairing up: a little timely
neck-dipping will seal their bond.
They are inquisitive about each other;
curious too about their reedy bed, fringed
with fleshy flowers. Near the Tower, where
couples loiter, their nuptial canopy is
those airy birches, tickle of willow
and the long memory of hawthorn.

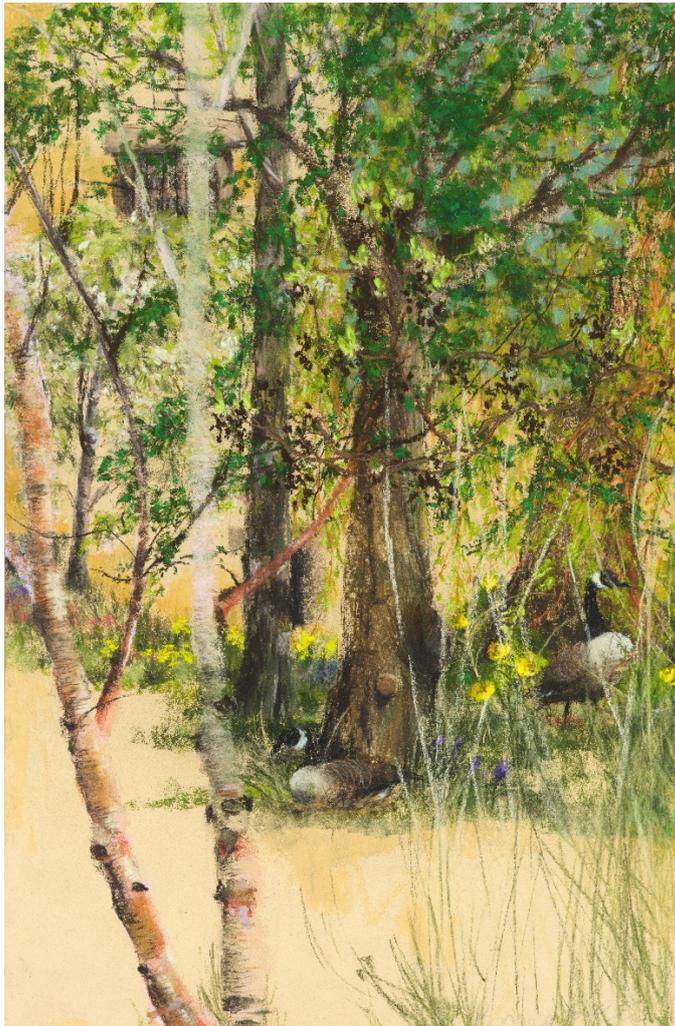


In balance

In such fine livery, it's hard to see
the pair of you as 'nuisance birds'.
Was this her nesting site of choice,
where paths converge?
She seems a patient sitter,
bears well with humans.

You're the wary one: a fox at dusk
would shiver at your frenzy, run a mile.
Your dedication is exemplary.
Sometimes you nap on duty, shifting
your bulk from one spindly leg
to another; no sign of stiffness.

We tend towards
the wayward,
can topple easily:
your effortless art
can still us
make us gasp.



3.9 *Appreciation of the nature of beauty through the seasons of life*

We were fortunate to experience the garden throughout the seasons: to see plants and trees bud, blossom and fade; trees drop their leaves after a burst of autumnal beauty. We found as much to appreciate in winter as in the height of summer.

A kind of mirth

Apricot, acer and friends

Unseasonal buds of apricot are bursting,
bright pink with lemon stamens.
They sprinkle naked branches
with a kind of mirth, a smile
behind the hands; a delicate intensity.
A bumblebee could get drunk
basting itself in pollen
if it stumbled on the invitation.

Above ground, mutual adorning;
and underground, no doubt,
a secret sociability and care.
The acer, still bare, will stun us
later, with subtle shades turning
from brightest green to red; while
blousy euphorbia will push itself
forward, exploiting a gap.

Meanwhile the hill and the kirk
are bit parts; the wind off the loch
murmurs the firs and a piper
accompanies all the little birds.



Something of the marvellous

In all things of nature there is something of the marvellous.

Aristotle

Mornings still nip at our heels,
kill tender shoots; but this group
are emboldened by the witch hazel:
a harbinger of warmer days,
a bright sway of pinwheel galaxies

lighting her bareness.
Might they spiral off
into new life-forms:
fireflies of the north,
glowing in the dark?

The old pine has seen it all,
the fir weathered many winters
but the delicate acer is in awe,
and the apricot offers them all
her momentary blessing.





Also the plant world has many processes of resurrection and rebirth. Humans can disparage old age and see no beauty in elderly wrinkles or faded hair. The iris, like several other plants such as the hibiscus, can confuse us with faded flowers looking uncommonly like new buds.

Undimmed

A last iris, late in the season,
still holding every hue:
through all the blues and greens,
tinctures of mauves and violets;

colours from Caspian,
tints of the old Silk Road,
tongue to tip,
a fine-veined tracery.

Its tissue withering is
a gathering into itself;
a reprise of its first unfolding
and just as lovely.

Time reshapes the works of love:
a conversation of petals tuned
to the season's rallentando.
Our wrap of memory sustains
such fragile futures.



3.10 *Appreciation of nature as consoler and inspiriter in difficult times*

Spring 2022 was dominated by news from Ukraine. Being in the garden and responding to its various rich habitats seemed to bring a measure of inner calm, but also of joy and astonishment which was an antidote to the constant barrage of depressing news; of man's disregard for the wellbeing of others and of our planet. Nature, when left to thrive, continues despite us. It was also a delight when a Ukrainian refugee with little English, was welcomed as a volunteer. She missed not just her husband and parents in Kiev, but also her lovely garden.

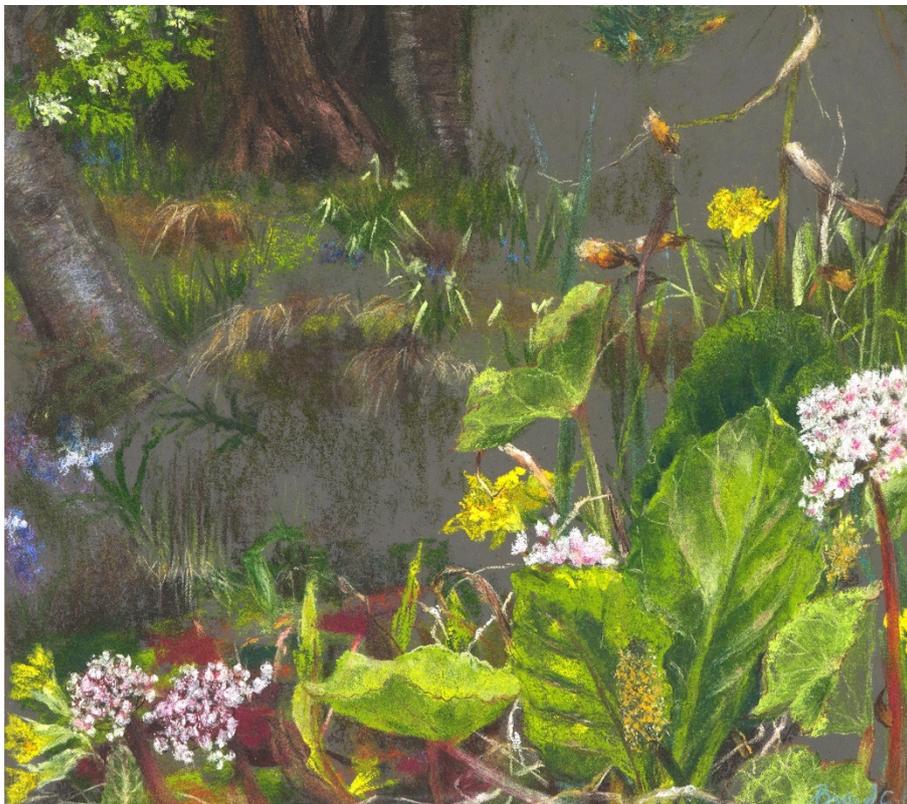
When the world feels broken

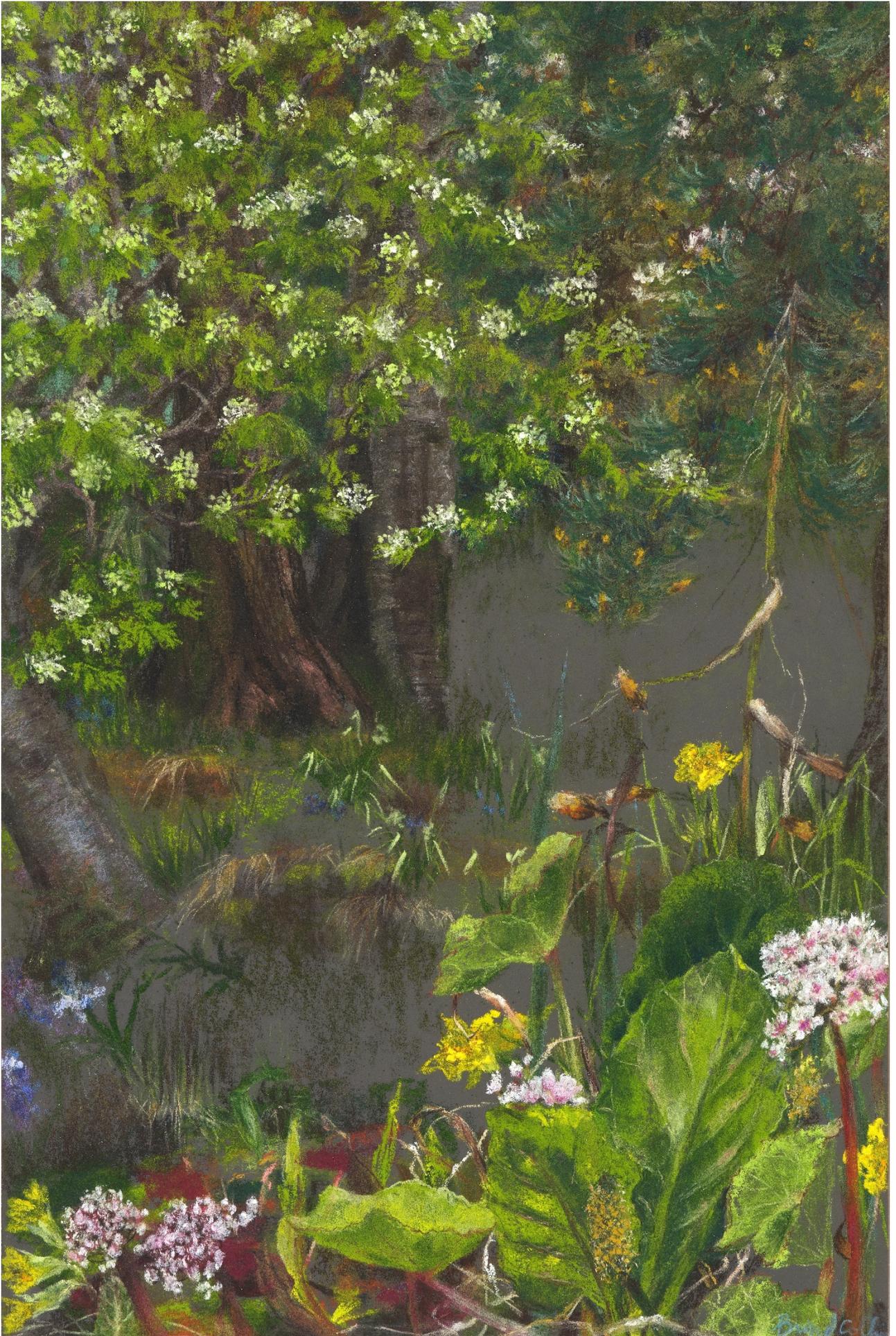
Though the rowan has veered offstage, it has left us
its crown of blossom: fronds of white,
leaves that filter light over the little pond.
Who will dominate this chronicle? The pines are
merely a backdrop. Perhaps it is the pool itself,
succouring others, bonding them together?

Or darmera, with its pink flowers, stems like rhubarb:
lush-leaved, profuse, longing for mountain streams,
opening its green umbrellas, hoping for showers. It rivals
the brash marsh marigold, Dürer's tufts of cowslip.

All is on cue: grasses and ferns edge in on the mirth.
Once bluebells have faded, there will be water lilies;
and irises will once again stun us to attention, mend
our hearts, remind us of *time's continual arc to earth*.

Final phrase is from David Gascoyne's poem *Spring MCMXL*





3.11 *Appreciation of a sense of wholeness*

There was serendipity in finding a piece of a Willow Pattern crockery so close to the muscari, and something Edenic in the glorious plant community as well as in the story of the design.

Echoes of Eden

It could be the huge arms of the elm
that stop them in their tracks,
or the brief froth of cherry blossom

above them – a sift of mortality,
or mountain dogwood with its shower
of bracts, a bower for lovers; or

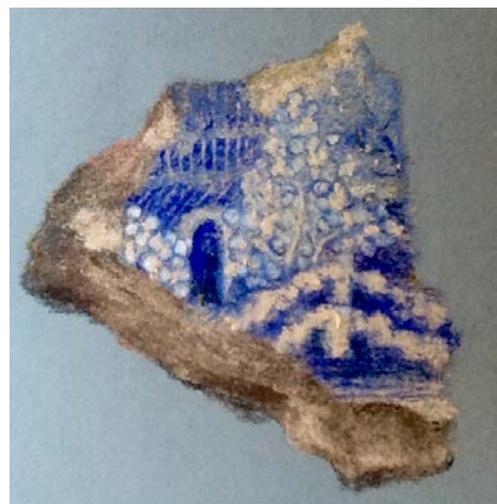
pink bergenia, all plump and plushy;
or the grasses with their gift of berries
now their flowers have faded.

But, no, there's something about muscari,
its intense blue, that catches the eye; even
that willow pattern fragment, now unearthed,

has sensed a kindred beauty; picked out
the colour; while bees, allured,
pay homage, settle on its florets.

And, when muscari withers to perfection,
its tiny seeds will be tucked in sacs: bells
that a slight breeze might shiver, or

perhaps they are tissued lanterns,
brightening dusk, settling the birds
and bringing home the lovers.





*above you a gift
of mortality...*



Lantern light

Grape Hyacinth - Muscari armeniacum

Your burst of cobalt
brightened Springtime,
seeds secreted deep
in the blueness of your prime.

Now you stoop and wither,
fade to modest white;
to paper lanterns hanging
like quiet temple lights.

Will the planter tap you
to gather gifts of seed,
or will they flee in a windy night?

Hold that breath till
the artist gladdens you, paints
your shadows, restores glimmers.

From Reflection, Time and Space, by Kitty Wheeler

It is 'in the long light of afternoon' that hop, ginkgo and wild rose emerge in watercolour on Brigid's paper. Time and temporality thread throughout both poems and paintings: there are roses and rosehips, flowers in bloom and flowers in decay. In the 'Undimmed' iris, we find that 'Its tissue withering is / a gathering into itself; / a reprise of its first unfolding / and just as lovely.' One of my favourites in both poem and painting, 'Lantern light' – grape hyacinth, touches me especially: 'Now you stoop and wither, / fade to modest white; / to paper lanterns hanging / like quiet temple lights'. The words 'stoop and wither', which we usually use to describe decay, give rise not to ugliness but to the quiet beauty of paper

lanterns. Death and decay, we understand, are not a deadening but a reconfiguring. Late in the season, the loveliness of the grape hyacinth may not be a 'burst of cobalt', but they might, notwithstanding, be 'gifts'. But 'Lantern light' is not simply a poem about grape hyacinths; it is also a poem about the making of art. The delicacy of Brigid's painting, touched by both shadows and light, is met by the delicacy of Christine's rendering of artistic process: 'Hold that breath till / the artist gladdens you, paints / your shadows, restores glimmers', she writes. The painting itself, that relationship between plants and artist, takes place within time – the tangibility of a breath – even as it captures the slow time of growth, season, and decay. The word 'lovely' in 'Undimmed' is telling, for it means worthy of love, and in it we sense the nature of the communing between artist and garden. It is love that artist and poet bring to the garden, a love that withstands the effects of time. Yet 'Time reshapes the works of love' – love is not airy, abstract, but grounded in the real. It is as dedicated and honest as the painting of shadows, and in it, we find gladness.

Grounded in the real, too, are the poems' and artworks' sense of place. The irises, plants, and pincushions, for all that I recognise them in the green glow of my own garden, and you in the sunshine of yours, are placed not only in time but also in space. 'The hill and the kirk / are bit parts' writes Christine, 'the wind off the loch / murmurs the firs'. This is not an abstract garden, but one in particular: Dr Neil's Garden, Duddingston, placed by loch and church and ancient volcano. It is the 'south slopes' of Arthur's Seat that 'are a July sensation; have slipped from / ancient cultivation to the lazy sway / of Rose-bay willow herb'; it is Duddingston loch, with its interloper geese, that peeks in 'Under the willow'. And yet there is, too, the sense of the holding of the garden within a bigger space. In 'Witch hazel', there is 'a bright sway of pinwheel galaxies // lighting her bareness. Might they spiral off / into new life-forms: / fireflies of the north'. Christine is picking up on something subtle in Brigid's oil pastel: the texture gives way, around the hazel pinwheels, to space and air. It creates a shift in mood that Christine's words echo. The garden is right here, and precious for it, they seem to say – and, too, it reaches out to the great and spacious whole of which it is inextricably part. There is a wonder in this, and the sense of how that seam of love of place gives rise to a love of all place; how the dedication and attention to the micro places love at the heart of the macro. There is a saying attributed to Mother Teresa: 'If you want to bring peace to the whole world, go home and love your family.'

With dedication and attention come, in turn, both soberness and hope. 'It's a struggle to like the wasp,' writes Christine of 'Robin's pincushion', 'But who knows what gifts, what remedies / might languish in such oddball chemistry; / in such harmonious entanglements?' Love is a practice, we are reminded, and it is a practice embedded in time. It is commitment to the possibility of a future we cannot yet foresee, and mysteries we cannot yet understand, wrapped in that entangled private pincushion world. In commitment, there is surrender to plants, who they are, and all that they unknowably hold. In 'No future without fungi', Christine suggests: 'Give us a few years and we'll be wearing them, / cured by them, cleansed by them. / Meanwhile / we ask...where are they going? / How much do they know?' The questions have no answers, but it is in the asking that we open ourselves to the possibility of more. And it is the possibility of more not only in a big, abstract sense, but also in the concretion of Dr Neil's Garden itself: a physic garden in origin, a place of local social projects, a bringing together not only of poems and paintings but also locals and refugees, children and adults, the healers and the healing. In the big and the small and the place where they meet,

the heart finds rest, and the spirit finds peace.

3.12 *Awareness of the power of symbols to stir spiritual response*

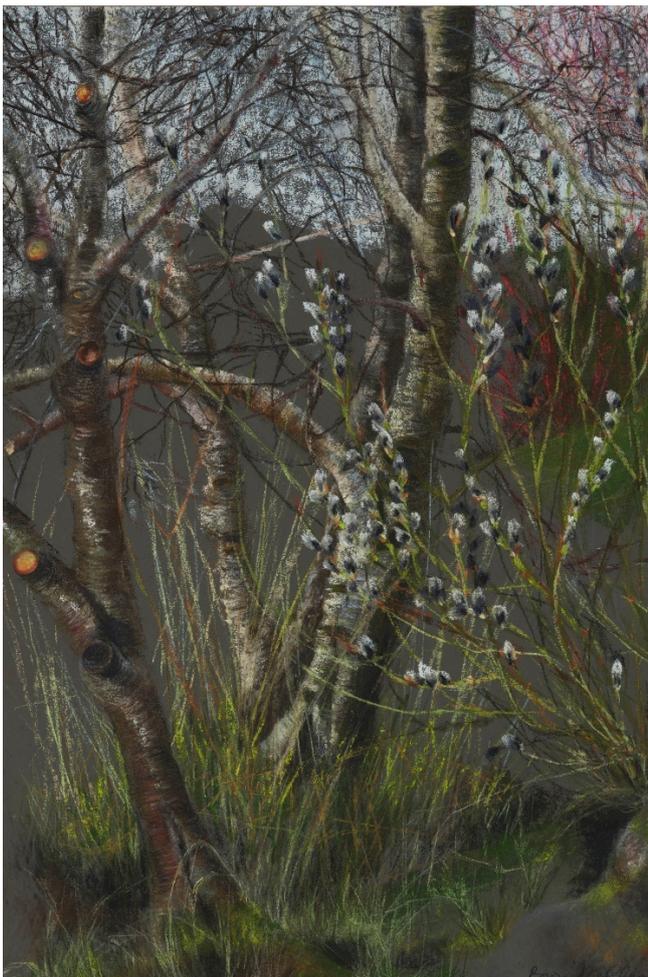
In mid-March I was on a poetry tour in Finland – travelling quite far north – but in touch with Brigid who was cutting reeds to make St Brigid crosses with the volunteers and drawing the stunning pussy-willow (against tree bark). It was happenstance that at the same time I was cutting a few willow stems and reeds to take home from the icy edge of the Gulf of Bothnia.

Symbols

You are drawing in the garden while
I am far away, traversing a frozen bay
fringed with reeds and pussy-willow:
I gather stems of each to savour.
Sun sinks early through chill stillness.

By the loch, you find reeds ready to cut;
and willow catkins, snug in grey fur, beg
to be stroked, to have you close.
Dogwood looks on fire, a burning bush.

In the north where palms don't thrive,
willow and rush will welcome Easter.
In the garden you weave a Brigid cross
from reeds: it will last through summer
like the velvet buds still alive in my vase.



Symbols have always been part of spiritual experience – they can ‘touch’ us. We use a verb of the real, material world to explain a concept of the metaphysical world, that world of the mind – perhaps spirit – which cannot be reached or proved through objective study. Perhaps that is part of the deep nature of ‘spiritual reality’.

St Brigid's Cross

1st February – Imbolc, St Brigid's Day

Fold it over, press gently, turn the rushes
through ninety degrees; repeat and repeat,
like breathing or walking, or loving.

Keep the centre firm, pay special attention
to the loose ends; like we do with family,
with friendship; like we've always done.

Hang it up, watch it change colour with age.
By the time it gleams dryly, plants will be
flourishing, summer round the corner.

The coming of Spring, always festivity:
new life and hope – Imbolc or Easter –
Brigid weaves them together.



In her book, *The Well-Gardened Mind*³ – a book largely about the positive mental health benefits of gardening – Sue Stuart-Smith points to ways in which poetry can affect us, particularly in relation to consolation and recollection; and how this becomes magnified in a garden. Early in her book (p5) she quotes Wordsworth:

*To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity...*

Going on to observe how “trees, water, stones and sky may be impervious to human emotion but they are not rejecting of us either. Nature is unperturbed by our feelings and in there being no contagion, we can experience a kind of consolation that helps assuage the loneliness of loss”. Stuart-Smith then (p15) takes us more deeply into the effect of gardens on Wordsworth’s thinking, how “nature animates the mind and the mind, in turn, animates nature”; his garden “both a physical setting for the house” (Dove Cottage) “as well as a setting for the mind”. Stuart-Smith very much presents Wordsworth and his poetry as having been a forerunner of psychoanalysis, and of Freudian thought in particular, in that he understood that our sense impressions are not passively recorded, rather that we construct experience even as we are undergoing it, that we ‘half-create’ as well as perceive the world around us and that poetry forms a bridge between the conscious and subconscious mind (p 14).

From Reflection by Kitty Wheeler

Drawing together

It is this that I take away from Brigid and Christine’s work: we are different from plants, and this, wonderfully, is the gift of our deep mutuality. Let me come back to that unlikeable wasp: ‘what remedies / might languish in such oddball chemistry?’ Christine asks. It is in the very fact that we are in both communion and at odds with plants that the possibility of remedy arises: for what is healing, after all, other than the weaving together of things that are at fractal counterpoints to each other – both the same, and different? In Dr Neil’s Garden, plants and people share space and time, soberly and with care, and in so doing create something new: art, for example. And then in art, Christine’s words and Brigid’s images co-create a story that is multimodal, a conversation that includes but transcends what is spoken. Here, in Christine’s words, I turn to St Brigid’s Cross: ‘Fold it over, press gently, ‘turn the rushes / through ninety degrees; repeat and repeat’. These are words that bring a lump to the throat, and an opening of the heart. For isn’t it a wonder that of all the names and people in the world, it is a Brigid, and a Christine, who together have looked deeply into the heart of this one place, with something to tell us about all; from whose work arises a fractal geometry of connection and distinction? The cross says it all, and so it is here that I end, with gladness.

*Soppy, I sniff
inchoate presences in the dim, substantive
trance of a summer night*

*.... Wherein lies one function of the poet,
To be instrumental in the soul’s increase.*

Derek Mahon⁴

³ Stuart-Smith, S, *The Well-Gardened Mind*, Scribner, New York, 2020, pp 5-15

⁴ Mahon, D, *Dreams of a Summer Night*, Gallery Books, New York, 2010, p118

Coda – beyond words?

Labelling

Looking always worked towards a word
John Burnside

In the beginning was the word:
that capture of thought, delight
in imagination, in pinning down.
We can't seem to stop ourselves
bonding memories to words; language
to hold the memory of a moment.

The baby touches, we say the word;
he points again, babbles, we repeat
and sound it out till he says it
the way we say it. Now he holds
the magic for himself.

We learn to love what
we attend to, what we label.
But memory can falter: is prone
to gaps and lapses. We rummage
for a word, a name, a thought;

can find ourselves back to
the simplicity of the unnamed: attending
to each other as equal beings; just me
and that little brown bird whose legs
the sun makes almost see-through,
showering in my bird-bath.

Words can tumble away from us,
as if released, exposing sentience.
Is it that rose that we smell? Love is
at the beginning and at the end.

