

EMERGING INTO A COLOUR-FILLED WORLD

The birds were singing their evening chorus as dusk fell. It was getting chilly, but my husband sat quietly beside me on the damp bench. We didn't speak but he knew. I was drinking it all in, this moment in the valley. Later that evening the text I was expecting arrived. 'You are clinically extremely vulnerable to coronavirus, do not leave your house, not even to go for a walk'.

My world became small, enclosed, but I took solace in my garden. When my husband took his daily walk I sowed seed into my small lawn. Each day I attended to a small area of this muddy patch: raking the soil, sprinkling the seeds, feeling the soft compost as I patted it down gently. Slowly, slowly, fine new grass emerged - thin slivers of green against the brown.

Now it is a beautiful bright sunlit day. We pull on our shoes - my first walk in so long! I haven't seen the spring arrive, gently unfurling in the valley. The colours burst onto my retina: cherry-blossom pinks, vivid laburnum-yellows, the purple and white of lilacs dazzling against the blueness of the sky. The hedgerows are frothy with cow parsley and the pink champions dance. I quicken my pace towards the stream that runs down the hill into the drain beside the road. Last time I saw it, it was in full-spate. I long to see it again. I laugh! It is now invisible, completely covered by lush, green growth I haven't seen emerge. I push the damp foliage gently back. The leaves are cool against my hands. I find the stream, now a narrow trickle. I pause. Nearby, with my fingers, I trace the words on a commemorative plaque set into the wall:

This evening we took a very charming walk to the village of Charlcombe sweetly situated in a little green valley - Jane Austen, 1799.

Later that evening I speak to our son on the phone. I tell him about the walk, the colours, the stream. He cries.