

## Charlotte Verity

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Edmund de Waal, 2016

i

What does it mean to return to a subject, to go back to paint these few snowdrops in a glass, an apple or two, a branch from a birch tree with its just-clinging leaves? To mark a place out as your terrain, a windowsill, say, and then come back and see how the light changes, thickens, how the dusk clouds the spaces, how the shift of hours takes you away into yourself. Returning is hard work. There is no grandeur in looking hard at this, your self in the world. It is necessary. You are thinking aloud about time.

ii

These paintings are about looking again.

John Clare looks at his landscape, the fields and woods of Northamptonshire, with longing. He looks at what was present in his childhood and what exists now. He charts minutes and hours and seasons and years, the birds and trees and flowers, a hedge, a copse.

'I love the lone green places', he writes, knowing what kinds of silences are necessary to bring thoughts into clarity, to bring about the distillation of many things into singularity, bring an image alive.<sup>i</sup>

His poetry is full of birds' nests. The hen's and the quail's, the firetail's, the nightingale's, the thrush's, the yellowhammer's. This makes sense. You need to be attentive to how a tree changes with a movement to find a nest. You need scrupulous attention to discover what it is – 'Five eggs, pen-scribbled o'er with ink their shells/Resembling writing scrawls',<sup>ii</sup> he notices of the marks of the eggs of the yellowhammer, 'ink-spotted over shells of greeny blue' of the thrush.<sup>iii</sup>

A nest is a kind of sculpture too. A holding together, a structure tracing a bird's traverse of these few miles. It is an idea.

Clare wants to hold the year in language. He writes *The Shepherd's Calendar* marking this place in the world in all its particularity,

its fullness.

In these paintings by Charlotte Verity the seasons' ebb is marked. They are a calendar, a series of poems tracing one full moment and then another.

iii

These paintings are alive to structure. There is a matrix of twigs and stalks and branches and stems. These lines have always been present in her work but now the skeletal is coming into view, becoming a subject in itself.

This toughness reveals so much.

These structures are fiercely exact. And they abstract. These branches are lines of thoughts, of nerves dividing again and again. Calligraphies, dendrites, a kind of musical notation, markings on a wall, into a wall, in mid-air.

In *Spent Stems* they are stripped back, essential in their wintriness. To understand winter, wrote Wallace Stevens, you need 'a mind of winter'.<sup>iv</sup>

These lines hum.

iv

There are other kindred painters of windowsills and ledges, an open window. I think of David Jones and Winifred Nicholson. These are liminal spaces in paintings, a bridge between worlds. They have nothing to do with domesticity. They are about the edge of the world – the place where things change. Outside is a street, a hillside, the sea, an altogether elsewhere. Inside is your mind. You paint this edge. Say it again. They have nothing to do with home.

v

Here in these paintings is temporality.

Pears are good for this, each moment from hardness to deliquescence a slight movement. Pears swelling, pears scattered across the ground, a pear's last leaves barely hanging onto a branch. These are paintings of lateness. Daisies in September, spring

flowers on the cusp in *Sky Blue Spring*, golden fragility in *Betula Weeping*. This is part of their beauty.

It is part of our language, this rhythmic falling away. 'For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away'.<sup>v</sup> These cadences are so quiet.

vi

You cannot come and just do it. You need to have seen it through.

These paintings are about waiting.

*Height of Summer* feels like an hour, the hour where you look away and look back and a flower has shrugged, the petals drifted down. *Town-Light Winter* feels like days.

These paintings distil. They are exacting, beautiful, tough.

Wait with them.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> John Clare, "The Maple Tree," in Eric Robinson and David Powell eds., *John Clare: Major Works*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 423.

<sup>ii</sup> Clare, "The Yellowhammer's Nest," *The Rural Muse*, (London: Whittaker & Co., 1835), p. 79.

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid.*, "The Thrush's Nest," p. 128.

<sup>iv</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, vol. XIX, no. 1 (October 1921), p. 4.

<sup>v</sup> 1 Peter 1:24, King James Bible.