

JUNE

THE FIRST HIT OF SUMMER in the city lands with the same high pressure that causes it. Brick walls soak up the unexpected sun, tarmac shimmers with the bake of it. We are sweaty, accidentally bundled up in our tights and coats and boots. A giant palm has been laid above us all and we celebrate by flocking outdoors, to the gardens and parks, to crack open tinnies in a million hissing gasps. We know it won't be hot for long.

People tend to forget how wet and showery June can be. A sunny weekend early in the month, oft declared a heatwave by certain newspapers, will usher the summer open – even though the solstice, the tipping point between light and dark, won't arrive for weeks. But rain will follow, it always does. It's the combination of both the surprising blister of heat and the runaway gurgle of persistent rain that allows the plants to grow.

Because June is fertile. There is a pause between the dainty abundance of spring and the heft of summer in its peak. In June, things are growing and gangly, on the cusp of riotous change. Hollyhocks spring up from the earth, looming on kerbsides.

Tree-lined roads appear to shrink as the boughs fatten with leaves. Grasses become wild and swaying, there to catch the back of knees. Roses explode in softness and scent, ready to become heavy with rainwater. There are so many buds that, after wind and rain, some end up on the pavement, offering a crunch under passing feet. Everywhere is green and teeming and eager with it, this burgeoning sense of new life. The solstice nears, tipping the world on its axis. It changes the shape of the days we fill with everyday things.

•

My life had been steady for a while. It was the start of the third summer in the same home, the longest stretch of time in one place throughout my twenties. That flat bore the weight of the seasons, looking, as it did, across the city from the fourth floor on top of a hill, capable of catching both dawn and dusk from the dining table. It would steam up in winter, condensation trickling down windows letting in the feeble dawn, water pooling on the sills. Storms would batter it. And with the bright heat of summer, we would open it up and let the day stream in until the silhouettes of evening painted themselves across the blushing walls. A brisk wind would rattle down the hallway and slam the doors at either end of it, interrupting the blanched calm of the place.

This was the ship that we commandeered, Josh and I. A gleaming white home that sometimes felt too grown-up for the stuff we had accumulated together, too polished for what bound us: adventure and appetite.

We'd fallen in love five years earlier, in the next neighbourhood along, over a summer of packed lunches in the park and walks along the Thames. Whole warm weeks passed before we kissed, a few minutes after midnight, next to the lions in Trafalgar Square. He was another thing in the new, lonely sprawl of London that I drank from, bitter and refreshing and moreish. After that, we were rarely apart, falling into a relationship without really knowing what one was. His early twenties unravelled into mine. Quiet and thoughtful to my rapid noise, he showed me care unlike any I had known before. I, meanwhile, tried to tug him out of every tight perimeter of his comfort zone.

We were each other's formative loves; the ones that blossom brightly on unsteady ground, root down between the cracks of youth and keep going in spite of unseasonal weather. And we had ticked the boxes of young adulthood: dancing until daybreak, travelling far, falling out. We stuck together in spite of illness and heartache, we learned to put another person first even when it hurt. We worked hard at it, this love. Patched it together out of fierce support and understanding, making do when we couldn't make it better. Our lives folded into one another, as lives in love often do. Human origami; we had become practised at it.

With time, it felt like we grew into something other and different to ourselves. We were connected by our ambition and determination to get the careers and lives we wanted, but also the things we had built together: impenetrable Escher castles of language and humour, spinning tales that could be reduced to code-like snippets. How we revelled in it, this secret, snow-globe world shut off to others. I'd never met somebody who worried

more than I did until I met him. He made me seem free and easy in a way that others never had. But nor had I encountered someone so committed to looking after me, so strong in their moral compass, so uncompromising in their understanding of what was wrong and right, and so quick in the mind. I loved that he unspooled himself slowly, that to know him was like learning a well-earned secret. And so when we grew up before everybody else did, it didn't seem to matter so much because I was doing it with him.

The flat was a mark of graduation, of commitment entrenched in serious paperwork and legalese. Binding things. We were among the very lucky, very few home-owning millennials, and in London. The ones who bucked the headline horror stories, thanks to a mixture of inheritance, the generosity of others and a beyond-our-years maturity. Made of bricks and mortar and yet I treated it like an eggshell: a precious and often preposterous casing for our nascent lives. More a new toy that had been bestowed upon us than a place to live.

We tried to make a home that smothered even our young world-weariness in comfort, one that copied the Pinterest boards with Freecycle trophies. With time, the novelty of the place softened. We conducted normal life in it, sandwich-making, teeth-brushing. Took in a lodger to help us with the bills and slipped into different bedtimes. And I started to push beyond its boundaries and into the world outside, through the door to the balcony.

The balcony was my favourite bit of the flat. I relished the dinkiness of it – less than four metres long, just over one wide and flanked on either side by weatherbeaten Crittall-framed doors

so small that people gingerly stepped through sideways while commenting, usually with a nervous laugh, that they might get stuck. Once I stepped through them, though, I felt a gush of freedom; to see the sky, to feel as though I was in it, was to breathe properly. My lungs felt bigger; there was more room to exhale.

Tentatively, I started to colonise it. I found myself spending more time out on that little sky platform. I wanted to bring life to somewhere that felt so gusty. I started with herbs – mint, thyme and sage – and crammed them, straggling and rootbound, into industrial-sized tomato tins rescued from outside a pizza restaurant. I drowned their poor fragrant bodies within weeks. I fell into a routine of leaving the house early on a Sunday morning and heading east, to Columbia Road Flower Market, with a £20 note. I'd bundle what looked nice into carrier bags and take them home on the train only to accidentally, goodnaturedly abuse them in all manner of ways. Bargain plants from Sainsbury's and Lidl offered horticultural training wheels. Things died, but others surprised me. It took me a while to learn that I must touch the soil before I watered to judge if the plants needed a drink or not. Instead, I'd just pour liquid love onto already drenched roots. I subjected tender growth to bruising winds. I saw height, plants growing tall if insubstantial, as a triumph rather than a sign of desperation for light or food, and when my plants bolted (going to flower, in order to make seed in a last gasp of energy before a premature death) I left them to bloom out of a mixture of intrigue and pride. And some were justifiably beautiful; even now, I will let rocket bolt quite happily: its delicate, windmill-shaped

white flowers are among my very favourites. Just before they go over, I cut them from their stems and add them to a salad, savouring the novelty of their softly nutty flavour.

While I had grown up in the countryside, the granddaughter of two men who had greenhouses and vegetable patches, who would find solace in thinning-out and breach their upstanding morals by pocketing cuttings from National Trust gardens, I hadn't taken an interest in gardening until now.

It's not that I was averse to nature: my childhood was one of bike rides, field-conquering and den-making. But there were books to be read, pictures to be drawn, fleeting fascinations with friendship bracelets and dance routines. I was prescribed glasses at seven and promptly became obsessed with wearing them; the kind of child so reticent to play outside that my mother would threaten to move us all to a flat without a garden until I did.

When the seeds of interest started to sprout a couple of decades later, gardening wasn't really the done thing. It felt like the most pathetic kind of rebellion at first: no drugs or sexual boundaries conquered, merely the ground. It wasn't clubbing or brunch, a long weekend in Copenhagen or a group holiday to Koh Samui. People my age were expected to do many things, often all at once – travel, work creatively, party hard, present well and sleep with one another in ever more fluid ways – but growing things was never one of the socially prescribed activities.

And why would it be? The soil beneath our feet was an alien thing, something to launch ourselves off from, into the giddy stratospheres of post-millennium promise. We had been brought up by parents who witnessed the rise of supermarkets; those of

us born in the last decades of the twentieth century were two generations distant from the people who grew to eat and enjoy. Front gardens weren't pruned in the Nineties; they were paved over. House plants were replaced with artificial flowers and potpourri. Conservatories, bike sheds and endless metres of decking took the space where greenhouses used to stand.

We learned the essentials of housekeeping – how to cook, clean and find vintage furniture on kerbsides – but those of tending to life outdoors became less relevant. Plants were superfluous. Even in the countryside they became merely the backdrop of a world constricting in its distance from other people. I craved asphalt and noise and the freedom granted by having a twenty-four-hour offy within walking distance, and so I found it. First in Newcastle; then, briefly, in New York; and finally in London, where it will keep me for a while, I imagine.

And yet, quietly, I was growing things. By June, jasmine was climbing gingerly up a drainpipe and purple basil was putting out leaves in spite of a shady corner. A courgette plant, still in its seedling pot, was flowering – even if the feathery reaches of powdery mildew would grasp its malnourished leaves soon after (courgettes, like most vegetables, need as much room and food as possible, and I gave them neither). The sweet peas I'd raised from pound-shop seed had been given their training canes. They would never flower, but in hindsight that wasn't a poor feat from such a stubborn-to-germinate plant. Recently I had been feeling inexplicably absent from the life I was living, as if I were going through the motions purely because that was what was expected of me. Fun, work, love: it was all muted, somehow. And yet here

lay real thrill, in every unfurling leaf, every nascent shoot pushing above the surface.

I gardened with an abandon fuelled by curiosity, small successes and crushing failures. I didn't have the money to invest in my experiments, so I scavenged. I'd pot up trays of annuals (plants that germinate, flower and then set seed all in the space of a year) in a mishmash of rescued containers: wooden pallets, oil tins picked off the pavement outside curry houses and leftover plastic pots nabbed from the nursery. The second summer, I made my sweet peas clamber up a hideous wigwam I'd constructed from dead wood found in the park and twine. By the third spring, I'd used that same twine to truss a length of chicken wire down the brick wall of the flat for that year's crop to soar up.

And I did envisage that they would soar, even though they often limped. I was yet to learn about the distinctions of fertiliser, the hunger of the container garden, or the merits of a good feed. I was only just grasping the basics – of light, of shelter, of space – through my errors and some confounding online research. I aspired to grow it all, feeling nature's gentle confines only by pushing up against them: chard will not flourish in a small container, but sow an entire packet of mustard seeds into a series of them, and optimistically reuse the compost, and yes, leaves will appear two seasons later.

My knowledge accumulated like dust, without me realising or measuring it; there was more of it the next day than there had been the one before. It moved and persisted, changed with the seasons, gained with success and stilled with defeat but did not wane. And my enthusiasm mounted with it. I became idly hungry for the balcony and that which grew on it. It would stay more

grey than green for years, but within that ragtag collection of pots and tubs and food tins were living things that existed somewhere in the gap between biology and my control. I'd linger at the balcony door, rest my forehead on the glass and stay there until, if it was cold, the mist my breath painted would cloud my vision. Josh would ask what I was doing, and I would always reply the same way: 'Just looking.'

Here lay endless fascination, but the balcony always remained my space. Others, including Josh, would come out on it sometimes in socked feet (I kept a grotty pair of flip-flops at the door, which I still refuse to throw out) and not know where to stand or look or put themselves. I was growing myself a cocoon without ever considering why.

Inside, meanwhile, increasingly became Josh's domain. I could be restless; tidying became a daily ritual as I attempted to instil my own sense of order on a space two people shared. I would spend whole weekend mornings cleaning strange corners of it, desperate to keep it lovely.

Between us, there would always be flashes of profound joy, the kind borne of years of familiarity; an hour of wild hysteria induced by pure silliness. But the rooms we occupied could also be a silent battlefield with opponent strategies orchestrated in banality: shoes in the wrong place and three-day-old papers never quite reaching the bin. At those times, when it was testy and heavy, the flat felt like an eyrie perched up on that hill, taking in all of London through its windows. A kind of cage. I'd look out over the river, to the east, where we used to live and where my friends still did, and wonder what I was missing out on.

I struggled to understand it, this frustration. The strange loneliness of living so closely with other people, of watching their lives stream in through screens. I had done all I was meant to do. I'd worked with the dogged fervour instilled in our education, education, education—entrenched generation. We were drilled by an exam system that turned success into a routine and near-perfect grades and good degrees followed. What awaited was a job market that demanded months of unpaid work for a faint whiff of a promise of steadier employment. I beetled through it, writing and working and picking up hangover cures, all in the hope of a career composed of bylines in newspapers and magazines people no longer bought. Of fulfilling the near-farcical dream of living off my words.

The jobs came along, in time. I became an editorial assistant at a buzzy new start-up and was greeted with a new laptop and a BlackBerry, which formed strange, invisible tendrils between me and the office. By twenty-four, I'd landed the kind of job that sounded good at parties – writing about pop culture for a broadsheet – and which was, in many ways, the realisation of hopes I'd hatched a decade earlier. When it was good, it felt like I was flying: going to gigs and festivals, writing about them and being paid for my imposter-syndrome-soaked opinions. But these were the rewards for a constant scrabble of trying to prove myself good enough over and over again, and having to swallow the casual rejection when I wasn't. To my mates, I had made it. To everyone in the office, I was just the new junior who hadn't yet grown jaded.

All that running around – from girlhood and school to university and internships – had led to days spent behind a desk. Cups

of tea and eating over keyboards and gentle ascent of a pay scale that allowed me to inhabit, but never really live, in a city that only the very wealthy could properly afford. The hunger that had propelled me there changed and sated; I had either landed the picture byline or the print feature or the front-page puff, or I felt like I never would. Work became a thing to pay for the holidays we increasingly took from it, a daily battle with overflowing inboxes. Somewhere between the canteen and the keyboard, my ambition diminished. I stopped caring quite so much.

London became less of a holy grail than somewhere I had to end up in order to work. I hurried between work and pub or event and home, taking in the scale of it all only when crossing the Thames and blinking at all the lights. I found myself spending hours glued to the sofa, watching trash on Netflix, letting it engulf an evening, the next episode starting before I could reach to stop it. The loneliness beat inside me like a heart, and it felt like the only thing I could never tell anybody I felt. While my friends partied, or dated, or watched Netflix as well, on other laptops on other sofas in other parts of the city, I sank into these fictional lives flashing before me, tapping out messages on Twitter and WhatsApp and Instagram, until the only hours when I wasn't near an illuminated screen were those when I was asleep.

And maybe this was inevitable. My generation – raised on Global Hypercolor T-Shirts and *Gladiators* – had been urged to thrive online rather than outside. Gameboys, Playstations, Nokia 2210s and an adolescence navigated through MSN, these were the plastic-cased trappings of the first British teenagers to dwell

in cyberspace and the last to grow up without it. Inside, we taught ourselves to touch type and torrent music, ramping up our demand for instant satisfaction with each boost in bandwidth. The glitch-filled song of the modem, repeated every time the phone rang, drifted away as broadband reached the provinces. I found out I'd got into university thanks to an email from UCAS before I'd managed to pick up my A-level results from school.

Digital time is a peculiar, distorted thing. News moves within minutes on Twitter; people can appear to hop from one country to another on Instagram. At work, I would silently compete with other people in other media companies to be the first to break the same nugget of entertainment news online. Everything had to be first, and fast. The fact that we had been at university without smartphones or Wi-Fi became a kind of quaint joke, as if we had teleported from the Dark Ages into the gleaming light of our devices. Such speed made other things telescope: I'd managed to arrive in my mid-twenties in an apparent idyll (nice boyfriend, lovely home, Instagram-worthy holidays) but without quite knowing how beyond the fact I was damn lucky.

It was as if I were floating in it, this strange accidental slumber, albeit happily. My lot was a good one really. Josh and I had an easiness, ways of pursuing our different interests away from one another. I delved into plants to a background of his affectionate mockery, and kept a similar disdain for his equally beguiling affectations. The contentment smothered me and drowned out any warning signals, a muffler against the sirens. I was certain of our future, that our lives would entwine and co-exist. Josh was just there – he always would be. We committed to the

things that far older, more steady couples do: newspaper subscriptions, long-distance flights, bits of furniture we scrimped and saved to cherish. We joked about what we'd be like when we were old. I felt so safe in it, in him. We were, to my mind, an undeniable surety.

Days of life and weeks of work could stagnate or rattle by. Instead, I came to rely on watching the skies to mark the passing time. The flat came with a view from Battersea to Canary Wharf, everything in between small against the gleam of the Shard. Even that, though, was dwarfed by the painted air above them, which transformed with each passing minute. The clouds would thicken and the colours would shift in a silent performance that played out regardless of who was watching. With it, I learned to see how the sun would make its progression across the horizon with each passing day in the grasped moments of daybreak and dusk. Sky-watching from the balcony, losing hours to unravelling small mysteries, allowed me to place an ever-smaller version of myself within an improbably great system, one that worked beyond my control.

On the morning it all fell apart, the skies were clear. The kind of deep and unrelenting blue that leaves the ground carved up with shadow. I was looking at it as I mindlessly spooned cereal into my mouth when Josh walked into the room and told me he wanted to go on a break; that we needed to go on a break. Minutes earlier, I had eased myself out of his sleeping arms. These events didn't make sense. I couldn't process them, didn't want to. Perhaps he tried to explain, but I can't remember what was said; the words reached my ears distorted, as if he were talking underwater. The cereal softened in the bowl, slowly collapsing under

the lapping tides of milk. I felt submerged by it all. When I came up for air, one sentence remained: 'I feel like I am falling out of love with you.'

•

The next few hours unfolded like tissue paper. My insides wanted to slump to the ground, let the day deal with itself and the next until this awful purgatory had run its course, but they were propped up by a determination to function as if nothing had happened. My generation's advocacy of openness, of talking about our anxieties and our mental health, existed mostly online. The propulsive need to turn up, do the job and leave late with a smile was far better entrenched. There were practical work things to be done, and so I got the grisly business of it over with – stood in the shower where I bawled with rage and confusion, allowing myself a few minutes of collapse – before putting on a brave face that I would carry, on and off, for the next year.

I daren't admit what was happening. It would let a fissure open that I wouldn't know how to close. It wasn't a normal work day – a shoot was taking place at the flat, and so I had to combine a broadcast face with the helpful unflappability of hosting. Every time one of my colleagues asked about the boyfriend I shared the place with I would pretend he hadn't just walked out, blood pulsing in my ears. At lunch, we took a break at the pub over the road and, while the others were fussing with mayonnaise and forks, I felt tears well up in my eyes. I gulped them down, hoped nobody had noticed. Inside, I was panicking. It felt as if my life

had fallen off a precipice, landed in a mess on the ground and I was just looking at it, knowing there was no help to be called. The notion of existing without him walking in the door and saying hello was terrifying.

It was still light outside when he came back to pack a small suitcase and leave. I learned that I was not as loved as I thought I was, hadn't been for a small while, really. We muddled towards the decision not to contact one another, to give one another space to work out if he wanted to – if he was able to – come back.

When I wasn't fearful, I wrote it off as a blip, a small crisis, a necessary snag in the rich tapestry that would become our lives together. Perhaps, in a few years' time, we would think back on it, make quips about it at dinner parties while slightly rolling our eyes. That seemed like something that we would do. That was more logical, surely, than everything simply imploding. It was just a pause, and afterwards we would pick one another back up and become a stronger and happier couple.

But it had been exactly this kind of denial that had led to my surprise at Josh's departure. In the determination to be all things at once – a prominent journalist, a well-rounded twenty-something, good company on a night out, an adored best friend, a next-level girlfriend – I had started to deny that some of those things weren't working, that it was impossible to be all of them simultaneously. What we had had looked good on paper, had looked like what we had been raised to want. So when it finally arrived and turned out not to be right, I'd quietly decided to accept that this had to be right. While Josh had been struggling with the confines of

our relationship and the ever-sharpening shape of the future I thought we'd have, I had been quietly shutting out reality.

•

By the next morning, the sky was muddled. Heavy clouds blew in, threw rain at the windows. I woke up in the bed alone, feeling only absence in its emptiness. My phone stayed quiet. I longed to find something on it, a message from him saying it had all been a horrible mistake. We'd always communicated fervently through our phones; waking up to text messages was something that started during my teens. With time, that transformed into waking up next to another body, and then only warm sheets, when that person had gone into the other room, because the Wi-Fi was better there. The silence was heavy.

June had grown cold and dank and with it the hours became slow, sullen things. I found the uncertainty – of whether he would take me back, of whether I'd be cast adrift – unbearable, despite how frequently I tried to solve it, working out countless different scenarios in my head, finding the only satisfying one a fantastical undoing of what had already happened. I hatched plans to leave the country, unable to consider a life in London without him. I just wanted to know what would happen, even as I stared down the crevice of an undefined break and imagined how the foreseeable would play out: spare rooms and sofas, damp flatshares, meaningless nights ending in tears, regret and more of the loneliness that was crashing through my brain.

Because nobody knew me like Josh. I was blessed with

excellent friends, but I had long learned not to really let them in, certainly in terms of my relationship. I was a staunchly proud person, riddled with the desire to keep up appearances. If Josh and I argued – something that had become increasingly frequent and upsetting – I wouldn't tell anyone. It wasn't the kind of thing that looked good online, couldn't be shrunk into a WhatsApp conversation.

Over the years I'd learned to develop different planes for different things, including the truth and what appeared publicly. And to a certain extent, his preferred version of me was different from who I was with my friends: quieter, more thoughtful, less messy and embarrassing. He made me feel like a better person, even if she wasn't always who I actually was. Without him, it was as if an entire chunk of my personality was absent and the rest of me was inferior.

I punished myself for letting the break happen. I was convinced that I had pushed him away, that I'd been too devoted to other things, to cleaning or gardening or writing, instead of him. That I hadn't given him what he needed, that I'd let myself go. I thought of all the different ways I could improve myself to make him want me back; I bought preposterous high heels to balance out the height difference between us, nice dresses because he usually only saw me in cycling leggings. I felt that I could change back to being what he desired. In a time of such confounding distress, I marched swiftly towards the practical, as if this was a problem I could solve if only I took charge of it properly.

My nascent self-education in gardening, meanwhile, went on the back-burner. It seemed futile. The future of our home was as vague and open-ended as the future of our relationship. If we

had to sell the flat, I had no balcony. Without a balcony, I had no plants. I couldn't contemplate that nurturing or appreciating them could exist beyond these boundaries I had put up. It felt daft to be worrying about whether the parsley was going to seed. While gardening had grown from a dalliance into a compelling part of life, few things seemed compelling in that punching fist of fresh heartbreak. Without him, I lost interest in everything else.

But that combination of sun and wet was an intoxicating one for the plants. The modest – prim, even – collection of annuals and surviving perennials that I'd spent recent weeks putting in and tending to were reaching their zenith. A proud, violet spire of lupin stood against the wall, surrounded by bacopa, its froth of petals releasing a citrus sigh. In the corner, purple *Oxalis triangularis* had put out delicate flowers that weighed down featherlight stems. There were petunias and a rush of African daisies in garish pinks and purples. I drifted over to the glass door, rested my head against it, and stared out at the plants, not focusing on any of them. Suddenly, the flat felt very large and very quiet. Nobody there, now, to ask what I was doing. The strain of keeping on, holding the tears back, of sheer weariness, lodged itself on my brow, pushed heavily on my eyelids. A dull and persistent ache. It was difficult to make sense of the show going on beyond the door, of the bright colours and new growth strong against the falling rain. I made pacts with myself not to cry, broke them.

On the fourth afternoon, though, there was an awakening. I came home to find the grey, rain-slicked floor of the balcony interrupted by a dash of the new. Two fat, furry poppy heads had opened outwards, leaving petals as crisp, perfect and white as laun-

dered linen. I inhaled sharply, they were such a surprise, defiantly gleaming against the surrounding gloom. Even buds I've been watching keenly for weeks – in the case of some, months – take me aback when they actually do bloom. It's almost like it happens in silence, when backs are turned or minds distracted.

Not that I had been watching. In the days that had passed, I hadn't kept an eye on what was growing, on which buds were swelling or which flowers going over. The magnitude of my upset, of the swirling confusion of Josh's departure, had seen me grasp for meaning in my rattling thoughts. I'd tried to impose order on impossible things, make sense of the unexpected. But here was something little – smaller than my palm – and unpredictable, and yet so right.

It made me realise that the plants didn't care. They didn't care if I was in love or out of it. They didn't care that I had stopped tending to them because I felt broken or that I had initially started because I sought to nurture something to feel settled, to fix something I had never even realised needed fixing. My state of being was entirely absent to them – of course it was, they are not sentient beings, not to contemporary human understanding, at least. And, regardless of what happened between Josh and me, of what people said or did to one another, the plants would continue to grow and bloom and go to seed and die back and grow again. Because that is what they exist to do.

The torrent of fear and upset and confusion paused, for a bit. Here lay the most reassuring notion I'd had in days. It took the wrenching apart of Josh and me and made it, just for a moment, seem small and banal. Heartbreak is such a ritual thing, an

all-encompassing emotional takeover that happens to hundreds of people in every passing minute. Those poppies felt like a tiny miracle, a reminder that nature keeps going regardless.

I didn't make any great plans; there were no vows to garden my way to happiness. But there was a dawning recognition that unexpected changes didn't always have to be bad. That poppy was the beginning of a translation. The language of plants and of growing them was one I barely understood but found myself scrabbling to understand. I wanted to navigate the means of life that surround us silently every day. And when I began to try to translate it – clumsily, slowly – it helped me to make some sense of what had happened to my life; not just in terms of the break-up, but in what else I had expected from it and where I wanted it to go.

•

Flowers may be thought of as delicate and fey, ditzzy things that inspire fervour in hobbyists and allow those with busier lives to pass by. But they have function and form and, as I was learning, a silent determination to flourish on their own terms. Women have long done the same, this steady upheaving of expectations and boundaries, and will continue to do so until our efforts are properly acknowledged. We have had to find our own ways into worlds and industries that we have been barricaded from, and that was as much the case with gardening as it was any other field.

Men imposed order on horticulture: they built towering greenhouses and amassed collections; devised the remits of garden design and created ways of putting plants in books that women

were not allowed to write. Women were excluded for a good while, for similar reasons to those for which women were excluded from many pursuits: because their brains were deemed too small or delicate, because it was considered unseemly.

But we weren't always horticultural pariahs. In the nascent days of 'botanomania' – the eighteenth-century phenomenon inspired by the exotic plants that arrived on the drab shores of Britain from the edges of the Empire in ships otherwise stuffed with spices, tea and tigers – botany was considered the most appropriate natural science for women to study. The fresh air was thought to be good for us, the foreign plants gave us something different to paint and new herbal remedies to uncover: essential skills for a lady. By the 1830s, some knowledge of plants was up there with mid-level piano playing and polite conversation as skills a well-to-do woman should have.

What the patriarchy underestimated, however, was that we would want more than just surface-level plant admiration. That we would become avid and crucial collectors of plants, introducing species to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and beyond. Women were responsible for bringing into the market some of the plants we grow domestically today: the delightful yellow fuzz of acacia and the delicate stripes of the cranesbill geranium were imported by a mysterious Mrs Norman of Bromley, thought to be the wife of a timber merchant.

I love the notion of these smart society ladies, dismissed by their fancy husbands, secretly forming a plant-importing network at parties. That they, too, were frustrated by achieving what society had told them was enough – a nice home, a well-chosen marriage

and the right education and frocks to get on with a good life – and decided to push beyond that, to find something for themselves that challenged what they had been led to believe they wanted.

Others, though, were less enamoured. By the end of the 1700s, botanists such as Carl Linnaeus and Augustin Pyramus de Candolle started to classify plants and it led to a division in how some people saw women's enjoyment of them. John Lindley, chair of Botany at University College London between 1829 and 1860, was particularly evangelical in his mission to push plants beyond the drawing room and into the lecture theatre, where women weren't welcome (although he did later write the 'Bic for Her' of botanical publishing: *Ladies' Botany, or a Familiar Introduction to the Study of the Natural System of Botany*). And while the Botanical Society of London, formed in 1836, was the first scientific society to actively encourage the participation of women, the only woman to contribute scientific papers to the society – Margaretta 'Meta' Hopper – was published under her husband's name. Other scientific societies became a battleground for the sexes. Wars would ensue for decades before women would be granted entry to meetings – let alone fellowships – and allowed to investigate, discuss and explore plants like the men who founded these institutions.

But plants aren't grown in lecture theatres, and women (admittedly, usually the ones fortunate enough to have money and time) carried on growing and collecting regardless. The British botanical scientific establishment shut them out, so the women went elsewhere. Some would accompany their husbands (men who were governors of colonised lands such as India and South Africa)

and go plant-hunting while the men were doing business. Others went on their own missions, commanded their own collections or defied convention by fashioning imposing gardens. And they studied plants, too, despite only being let into the Linnean Society fourteen years before they were given the vote.

For centuries, the collection, observance and nurturing of plants has been something women have turned to out of fascination, frustration and for relief. Bereavement, illness, scandal and heart-break have led us to make wonders of plants and gardens and forced us to find ways around the barriers that excluded us, even if it means sneaking into Kew Gardens at dawn, as budding entomologist Eleanor Ormerod did in the 1850s.

Women showed their potential as gardeners when they grasped at spaces that were often previously occupied by men. How wonderful that, when Charlotte Marryat – an American clever and confident enough to benefit from a loophole in the rules of the Royal Horticultural Society that failed to prevent women from applying and become the third woman to join it in 1830 – was left widowed, she spent her husband's inheritance on an entirely indulgent garden that held, among other things, a lake with two islands. Then there's Lady Dorothy Nevill, who, after being married off to an elderly cousin named Reginald Nevill in her early twenties, ignored social expectation and gardened with a thoroughly magical ambition. Sometimes it got her into trouble: when she attempted to farm silkworms at home, she ended up living with a plague of caterpillars.

A century later, women were still seizing land for themselves when vacuums in their lives appeared. Margery Fish undeniably

loved her husband Walter, but he was both a fair-weather gardener (Fish would lay the foundations of her flower beds in the depths of winter) and a horticultural tyrant, deadheading plants only to leave the scattered prunings for Margery to pick up. When he died, she reclaimed what he had not allowed her, showing her true potential as a woman prepared to wield a crowbar to encourage the smallest of creepers to grow, rebelliously, in the cracks in her path. Within the gardening world, she is known as a writer and a pioneer, someone who moved the boundaries on what an English cottage garden could be. To Walter, one suspects, she was the secretary who became his wife.

When Sarah Lees was left widowed in her fifties – her well-to-do industrialist husband suddenly dying within a week of their twentieth wedding anniversary – she channelled her bereavement into improving Oldham, the town that had made her late husband rich. As well as funding scholarships and hospitals, though, she also believed in the power of green spaces. Lees founded a society dedicated to beautifying the squalid industrial town through parks, open spaces and flower beds. She experimented to work out which plants would survive the smog and hosted flower shows and cottage garden competitions to spread the benefits of growing things in a city that made human existence hard. With the turn of the twentieth century, Lees applied the same vigour to the suffrage movement, raising awareness of women's rights as she had the value of urban gardens.

Grief led the unmarried Victorian botanist Marianne North to explore the world. Her mother died first, leading her to accompany her father on his travels. When he died, bereaving her of the only

travel companion she was willing to put up with, she continued alone. North, an innate feminist, had witnessed her sisters' marriages and decided matrimony was not for her, calling it 'a terrible experiment' that turned women into 'a sort of upper servant'. Instead, her life's work can now be found in Kew Gardens. A neat red-brick building belies the treasures within: eight hundred paintings packed in like photos in an album, created by North and housed to her specification. It is a relatively small gallery but kaleidoscopic nonetheless. Being there is like standing inside a jewellery box.

North began her solo travels at thirty-eight and did away with frippery. She didn't bother with elaborate frocks or the ambassadorial dinners her family connections afforded her, which could have made her years of travel more comfortable. Instead, she made her own way, telling people: 'I am a very wild bird and like liberty.' She roamed the planet according to geography and season – eighteen months schlepping across India, thirteen in Brazil – and painted hundreds of vistas that contained plants, such as mangroves, which had never been illustrated before and were on the imminent cusp of change. By preserving the plants in hundreds of paintings, rather than excavating them and bringing them back to the UK, North created a visual time capsule of landscapes that would vanish within years.

Being orphaned led Ellen Willmott to devote her vast wealth to lavish botanical expeditions, gardens in England, France and Italy, and dozens of gardeners. The list of things the unmarried Willmott grew is impressive and preposterous in equal part: 100,000 species, including one year in which she grew every variety of potato available to establish the tastiest. But what is

more remarkable is that her knowledge was considered enough to earn her an RHS Victoria Medal of Honour in its first year. She was one of only two women to receive it alongside fifty-eight men.

The other was Gertrude Jekyll. Jekyll, who was born in 1843 and started collecting plants aged twenty, was so rampantly influential in terms of garden design and gardening history that her well-trodden story hardly bears repeating here. But for the uninitiated, she gardened because she loved to paint, and when her sight failed, she spread colour with flowers, leaving a trail of inspiration that still burns brightly today. What resonates most with me about her, though, is that Jekyll had no formal horticultural training. Nevertheless, she wrote about plants for *The Garden* from her late forties and a decade later released her first book, *Wood and Garden: Notes and Thoughts, Practical and Critical, of a Working Amateur*. That working amateur was also a working well-to-do woman who made her own money as a gardener. In doing so, she opened the floodgates for other untrained but eager and talented women to follow in her footsteps.

Jekyll and Willmott were good friends, and both gardened to the end. When Jekyll's sight had completely failed her, she could still recognise plants through smell and touch. Faced with a letter warning the repossession of Warley, Willmott's beloved home and gardens, she went outside to weed. The horticultural heritage she's left behind, though, possibly says more about her. Miss Willmott's ghost, otherwise known as sea holly, is thought to have been named because Willmott had a habit of keeping the plant's seeds in her pocket to secretly

scatter in the gardens of others. A quiet, spiky statement of Guerilla Girl gardening.

Just as women tried to smash the glass ceiling in horticulture, they also shattered horticultural glass ceilings to gain equality more broadly. On 8 February, 1913, suffragettes broke into Kew's much-loved orchid houses, broke some forty panes of glass and damaged the invaluable plants inside. Kew was as popular a tourist attraction in 1913 as it is now – luring some 3.8 million visitors between June and September that year – and the gardens' director had received warning of an imminent attack from the movement. The women acted in the early hours of the morning and got away with it, but poetically left behind a handkerchief and an envelope inscribed 'Votes for Women'.

News of the incident made global headlines and brought great awareness to the women's suffrage movement. Possibly spurred on by the impact of their vandalism, twelve days later two suffragettes were caught in the middle of an arson attack on Kew's tea house. Olive Wharry, twenty-six (although she said she was twenty-three at the time), and Lilian Lenton, twenty-two, had left cards at the site of the fire signed 'Two voteless women'. The court reports paint two outspoken, fearless females – Lenton went so far as to throw papers and a book at court officials during her sentencing. They threatened to go on hunger strike upon imprisonment, and they did. Lenton was released after force-feeding left her with pleurisy, but Wharry went without food for thirty-two days. Two years later, women gardeners were brought into Kew to replace the men who had gone to war. When they returned during the Second World War, the press insisted on calling them 'Kewties'.

Alice Walker dedicated a whole book to her mother's garden, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, for it was here that she found evidence of what her mother could have achieved had she not been black and living at the turn of the twentieth century before becoming a sharecropping mother of eight who took on seamstress work on the side. Walker's mother, 'so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways', still managed to plant 'ambitious gardens with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November'. She did this by gardening before leaving for the fields at daybreak and after returning, 'until night came and it was too dark to see'. The flowers she grew meant that Walker's 'memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms', that 'perfect strangers and imperfect strangers' stop to admire what she considered her mother's art.

Fury, justice and heartbreak brought women and plants together. Eventually, the paths they trod began to last, imprinting onto society. After centuries of being shut out, women helped to make gardening something everybody could participate in, and uncover the refuge and joy held in plants for themselves. This was the legacy I was digging into when I found myself dragged to the balcony window, just to look, just to find a small, unspoken salvation in the things growing outside. To colonise my own little space with play and creativity. An outdoor room of my own.

•

While I had been calmly ignoring the nuances of the shifting seasons for years – the different smells in the air and the hardness of ground underfoot – I had created my own annual routines for some time. The solstice was both my best friend's birthday and, often, the beginning of Glastonbury Festival, where the longest days would stretch out into streaky night for those who had entered into a temporary world where time no longer held power. Drum and bass could be found at eight in the morning, meditation at dusk. For five days in the Valley of Avalon, where mists rise and tors crown hills, there are tens of thousands of heartbeats seeking others kinds of rhythm.

I had been going for the past few years for work, another aspect of the job that induced envy in others but, in some kind of cruel Faustian pact, could only really arrive with a kind of cynicism seemingly requisite in the music industry. I'd grown from a fifteen-year-old obsessed with discovering bands and dredging meaning from their music into someone too busy, too exhausted, to hunt out new ways of listening. I struggled to care as much any more, and I was scared to admit it; it felt like a failing, a surefire way of being called out as a fraud. While I was there, I was to condense the airborne magic of that temporary city into copy while rushing between stages. It was invigorating: I liked doing things swiftly, I liked watching bands and I liked writing about them even more. But I could never escape the feeling that, even with the backstage passes, everyone was having more fun than me.

Nevertheless, I found it an easy place to love. A near-week in Glastonbury had become part of my annual calendar, days and

nights beneath the sky, separated only by canvas and hood. I loved the rumble through the Somerset lanes in the coach to get there, that first glimpse of the impermanent city that lay beyond as the coach neared the site.

And this June was no different. A handful of days after Josh had walked away I was packing my rucksack, glad to be out of the flat for a bit, hopeful that the constant sensory overload of the festival would distract me, even for a minute, from my state of sad wondering.

But it was a difficult year. There had been heavy storms in the run-up; they slowed to a chilling, nagging trickle that permeated the days. My usual habits – joining Druids in their spiritual opening ceremony at dusk on the first night; ambling for a few solitary hours, taking in the mania of it all; racing to the Stone Circle to watch the sun rise on the Monday morning – were all hampered by the mud, feet-deep sucking stuff that must have held captive countless mobile phones, wallets, shoes and other detritus. Usually the festival site recovers (producing grass good enough for Worthy Farm's herd of 380 cows to graze on) in six weeks. But with the ground as ruined as this was, it took seven months. The earth needs time, space and a nurturing combination of sun, wind and fresh water to regenerate.

But it was also more difficult for me to shift my malaise and melancholy than I hoped. The previous days had been ones of shock and denial; the few friends I had told about it received the news in a wave of survivalist bluster; I shook it off in a gasp of self-deprecation, unable to dampen a chat at the pub with the extent of my upset. Here, though, in the rain-soaked outdoors,

there was far less room to hide my feelings, especially from myself. The usual dysfunction and exhaustion that takes place over a muddy Glastonbury – twenty-one-hour standing-up days on three of fitful sleep – was compounded by the chaos in my head.

I missed him terribly. A full-bodied longing for the sheer physicality of him: the way the back of his neck smelled, the heavy comfort I found in the gap between his arms, the fact he always let me fall asleep first. I obeyed the rule that we'd drawn up, not to contact one another, but I wanted to reach out for him and did so in ways that would be delayed – sending endless thoughts into the air, postcards from the novelty festival post box. When I realised they had arrived, and I didn't hear from him, I felt a complete fool.

I was convinced I could feel the pain of it in my bones, in my heavy flesh and outdoors-blasted skin. My senses felt softened by it all. I could feel little beyond a curious senselessness that occasionally drifted into distant hope. Pride had meant I'd been unable to share the state of my situation with those colleagues I was actively working with; I didn't want to be treated gently, for I would just crumble. And I wanted at least one part of my life to seem normal, even if normality was, at that time, taking place in tents filled with people all seeking release and hedonism. And neither release nor hedonism was what I wanted, merely the security of knowing I could go back to a life I never saw a problem with. The notion of moving on was impossible, the idea of losing myself daft – I was already so lost. Instead, I concentrated on functioning, on being good at the strange task of working somewhere where everybody else was on holiday, because I felt

so rubbish at everything else: at being a girlfriend, at being a lover, at being remotely wanted.

I used strangers like priests in confession booths, poured my heart out to people I'd briefly met in previous years in the hurly-burly of the press tent. Kind, middle-aged snappers who didn't mince their words and were there to take photos of James Corden and Alexa Chung in the backstage area, rather than, like me, hunt out secret sets and decide upon the most enlightening part of a performance. They shared their experience of love with me, offered stories that suggested it would all be all right in the end and, if it wasn't, well, then it was 'his loss, sweetheart'. Nobody could muster a different narrative: that I would go back with open arms and find Josh unwanting of them. That I would have to start again, and do so alone.

Meanwhile, the country was churning. While thousands of other people writhed to a DJ set under tree canopies, I stood with a stranger and, in the small hours, read on a glowing screen that Gateshead had voted to leave the EU. It felt like my generation's future had been stolen: a fearful, unimaginable blow, but one that in many ways felt like an extension of the mire I'd been living in. Little did we know of the years of turmoil that were being unleashed, of the uncertainty and havoc that would ripple through the country in the vote's wake and in how many ways all of our lives would be changed.

By the second half of the festival I had found a kind of release. After days of pretending to be all right, of trying to banish my tears and insist on upholding a kind of weird dignity to proceedings, I let myself cry. And cry with full abandon. Soft, gentle tears

during impassioned anti-Brexit speeches made by P.J. Harvey and Matty Healy; full-bellied, ugly, snotty bawling as Adele played ‘Someone Like You’ and 125,000 people sang along. As Adele played anything, really, flares and flags swaying together in one great feeling beast. I sobbed at the sound of eighty people spontaneously bursting into ‘Heroes’ by David Bowie – a song that had always held great significance for the pair of us. I cried at the sheer unbridled beauty of Florence Welch running around topless on the Pyramid Stage.

The freedom of it, of weeping unabashedly in public in a place where nobody cared, and nobody knew me, was so utterly cathartic. I felt like a plug had been pulled out, that I was draining away feelings that hadn’t just been pent up for the past week but for far longer. My denial was, gradually, being chipped away into the beginnings of a grief for what we had once been, and what I was beginning to learn we wouldn’t be again.

As for what would fill that space, though, that remained unclear. Glastonbury offered all sorts of alternative walks of life for people, spaces to play and disintegrate, to shuffle into another mode of being. Here there was always another kind of party to go to. That year, I never felt like I was at the right one.

Instead, I found small solace in among the festival’s permaculture garden. Peonies sat prettily in milk bottles, dodging the rain under the shelter of trees. A solitary bee made its way around a damp cushion of valerian flowers. While this ancient-feeling space had played host to hundreds of revellers during the solstice, once they had all gone home work would carry on: the compost heaps would rot and steam, things would flower, food would be harvested

from the edible green roof of the educational hut in a corner. Glastonbury's permaculture garden was founded in 1989 and it has happily churned its way through the seasons ever since. There was a balm to be had by stumbling into it from the disused railway that strikes through the festival site, the calm industry taking place there. A living reminder of the other lives that take place away from the city I knew and inhabited.

With the short nights came clusters of promise and intrigue. Even though I was often fed up with it all, frequently returning to the tent for snatched naps after finding the trudge to yet another show too beleaguering, I was still captured by Glastonbury's night. There I found a new thing: The Sisterhood. We stumbled upon a caravan with a fluorescent sign on top. Inside, two brassy women sat behind a manicure bar purposefully giving the world's worst file-and-paint. My middle finger was roughly glossed and shoved in a pot of glitter and then I was pushed through a curtain. My friends, all men, weren't allowed in.

The caravan gave way to a dark room filled with chintzy furniture, tasselled lampshades and a low stage on which an angular girl in a white suit fronted a punk band. Women's bodies puddled into one another in corners, nuzzled into cushions and swagged curtains. I knew nobody, but found myself looped into a group of girls who took me in and then out to one of the Latin music clubs nearby. I danced with my new friends until around four a.m. Their names come to me like a faded patchwork, and I never did see them again. But for a few short hours I was able to bury my misery in this fleeting doorway of what could have been another life; the first instance in years of maybe tearing myself

away from the cosy status quo that I had been slowly fitting into. Here was a dim and distant suggestion of what could be in an existence where Josh wasn't present, where I could be supported by women strong and confident and happy in themselves, and that I could be that too.

Enabled by the rare refreshment of a room where the rules had been drawn up by women, I started to think about where I stood inside the womanhood that had encroached on me during my twenties. I was resolutely hopeful that my relationship would recover but even that optimism couldn't ground me, couldn't release me from my denial and suspense. I was insistent I'd be taken back, that we'd have another opportunity to start again, even while I couldn't quite see how that would happen. The next night, I watched LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy mewl 'I Can Change' into a microphone, and it sounded like a prayer and a determination all at once. I felt that our fracturing relationship was my wrong to right, that my rejection had taken place because I had failed. I wanted to mould myself to make it work but something else was niggling: that I didn't have to be the thing to change, but other things could. After years of sharing myself with somebody else, I was on the cusp of being a single, thoroughly independent person for the first time since I was twenty-two. Perhaps I had to learn who she was as well.

Of all the signs, flags and slogans that pepper the Glastonbury site during its brief existence, one stuck out: 'What if we could live like this every day?' Part of the festival's magic is its fantasy, that it enables a semi-lawless existence built on freedom and agape, the kind of expansive love that is conjured by a crowd of

strangers all belting out the words to the same song. Here, the structures of society warp and meld; the lust for power and money shrinks as people sleep beneath canvas and roam outside, slightly grubby, for several days. We could, of course, never live like it every day. But those words clung to me, rattled around my brain a bit. Made me wonder if I needed to push beyond the remit that I had been living within, take to the earth the same way those society women who broke with convention by hunting plants did. Regardless of what happened with my relationship, doing what we had been told, it seemed, hadn't brought either Josh or me happiness. As the whole country looked at a seismic break in its future, I was being forced to confront mine – it seemed naive to think that everything could just go back to how it was before.

On the coach back, I drifted in and out of sleep, knowing that I'd return to an empty flat and the heavy arrival of an uneasy reality laden with questions. The country roads through Somerset were drowsy with the dying days of June. Pin-cushions of hogweed nudged into wild grasses, white turned to pink; cranesbill geraniums buffered the breeze and hollyhocks towered in the middle of dual carriageways. I fell asleep as we left the country roads, white morning glory closing up shop, woke an hour or so later. Eyes opened to see fields of pale pink poppies swaying against the grey skies like spun sugar, a hit of surreality on the side of the motorway.

Once in the door, I let a week's worth of filthy washing drop to the floor and headed to the balcony to see a clutch of sweet peas in bloom.