

See You Next Spring

Chitra Ramaswamy

The crocuses bordering the paths of my local park are dying back at the moment. Every day, walking my daughter to school across Leith Links with its rich recorded history of battles fought and sports invented, we mark their progress. How their obstinate heads pushed through the earth when the winds whipping off the Firth of Forth were still flattening the thin winter grass. How the bright green shoots unfurled and then, overnight it seemed, the polite, pursed heads lifted in a sea of purple, white and yellow. How, for reasons that nature does not divulge, the yellow crocuses took the longest time to open. How they blossomed fully to reveal their golden yolks, filling the park with the promise of spring. And how, too soon it seemed, they began to droop, snap, and lie down. 'Bye-bye crocuses!' said my five-year-old daughter, a couple of mornings ago. 'See you next spring!'

This is one of the many joys of having young children. They are invitations to notice that which you've taken for granted since your own increasingly faraway childhood. The white line drawn across the sky by a high-flying plane. The tangerine eye of a pigeon. A brown rat scurrying from riverbank to bush. Somehow, the things that catch our attention when we are young don't change. My son is autistic and saw different things. The pattern of a drain's bars. A train slicing through a distant landscape. But both my children loved the moon, to the extent of keening out of their buggies, arms outstretched, to try and grab it, as if it were a beachball that could be plucked from the sky. It was the toy in the shop they wanted most. They literally asked for the moon, as clear a demonstration of the boundless perspective of very young children as one can imagine. And once that point of view is lost, we can catch it only partially, in glimpses or phases, like the moon.

The truth is, crocuses are no longer harbingers of spring for me, nor will they ever be again. They represent spring's opposite. Three years ago, when my daughter was two and a global pandemic was upon us, my mother began dying as the crocuses were coming up. By the time she took her last breath it was midsummer, the crocuses were long gone, and flowers were blooming in abundance. Roses, foxgloves, sweet peas, delphiniums, salvia, begonias ... to list even their names is to summon the

rich, low voice of my beloved mother, who loved gardening, and flowers especially. It seems particularly cruel that she died as the natural world was coming into full bloom. Summer is unsuited to the brutally cold and unending season of grief.

I have watched the crocuses come up three times since her death. I'm glad of the pain they bring for it's as close to her as I can get. There is an immediacy to it: the crocuses come, and so must her death. Again, and again, and again. What else is there but to keep walking the paths flanked with those lowered heads of purple, white and yellow, into this lesser, more precarious, and precious future without her?

So connected are these two natural events that when I wrote about my mother in my most recent book, *Homelands*, the crocuses popped up there too. In doing so, I pushed the seeds further into the ground soil of my memory. The crocuses on Leith Links contain my mother's death as surely now as they do their yolks of pollen. They are a guarantee of mourning. When they come up every year, my grief bursts into flower.

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Chitra Ramaswamy is a journalist and author. Her latest book, *Homelands: The History of a Friendship* (Canongate, 2022) is a work of creative non-fiction exploring her friendship with the 99-year-old German Jewish refugee Henry Wuga. It won the Saltire Non-Fiction Book of the Year and was included in The Guardian's top memoirs and biographies of 2022. Her first book, *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy* (Saraband, 2016) won the Saltire First Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Polari Prize. She has contributed essays to *Antlers of Water*, *Nasty Women*, *The Freedom Papers*, *The Bi-ble* and *Message from the Skies* and recently completed a commission from the Alasdair Gray Archive. She writes for *The Guardian*, is the restaurant critic for *The Times Scotland*, and broadcasts for BBC radio.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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