

Hey, look at this!

Neil Richardson writes 12 articles about his own poetic work and what people, ideas and influences led him to write some of his poems. The series will last for the twelve months of 2010.

The Chastening

Chastened by a laggard, late Spring frost,
the garden's dawn is white and sharp, again.
Climbing with ease the cold and steel blue sky
the sun brings slow relief to grassy pain.

Around the silhouetted house and trees,
a stealthy vanguard mobilised at dawn,
warm light advances imperceptibly
to coax the hoary frost out of the lawn.

Released from its encounter with the ice,
the garden wipes away its stiff, cold frown.
So freshly bathed, inviting, soft and damp,
sweet tufts of grass are hanging gently down.

Tempted to rejoice,
I feel much more the chastening.

Spring in its turn
is short-leased, winter hastening.

All Nature's seasons have their pain.
All human life must wax and wane.

1999



The Rectory, facing eastward

The poem recounts an actual experienced one late Spring day in 1999. Everyone thought that winter had finally lost its grip on our climate and then, early one morning, I walked over to the Old Church to get ready for the early morning mass, and noticed how conditions had overnight returned to coldness of winter and a frost again gripped to garden. The return to winter took me by surprise and I noted my reactions in the poem.

As I walked along the path, I looked back at the house, facing the easterly direction where the sun was starting its ascent into the sky and although very cold, the sun was very bright, making the rectory into a black and white silhouette, blinding my eye to the detailed features of the structure. The sky was cold, but the blue was already sharp, steely sharp, and already, the advancing sunlight, “a stealthy vanguard...” with promise of more and warmer sunlight to come, was starting to warm up the grass, or “to coax the hoary frost out of the lawn.” The garden was in two halves. One half, as yet untouched by the advancing rays of sun, was white, stiff and sharp. The other half was already responding to the sun and tufts of grass had drips of newly warmed up dew on them.

I have never been one to be too involved emotionally in the weather! My feeling is that the weather is the weather and we need to get on with life, whatever the weather offers. I well remember the amazement of a German friend who we took one year to Dartmoor. The plan was to pack a picnic and sit on the grass to eat it at lunch time. Well, it rained and rained. So, we just stood around in the car park, not wanting to carry the picnic around, and ate the sandwiches and drank our drinks standing up in the rain. Our German friend remarked that she was really surprised that we did this and although she had heard the English people eat picnics in the rain, she hadn't really believed it until that very day!



Here you see Black Tor, about to get a dousing in the lovely weather!

Back in Greenford and in the garden early that day, I felt the temptation to rejoice at the coming of the summer, but drew back, remembering my instinctive caution.

The weather doesn't matter to us in our civilisation, protected by strong houses, central heating and welly boots. If we lived in the natural state, the matter might be different and we would have a much keener interest in what was going to be the weather patterns at the time.

But also, at a deeper level, the always-changing pattern of the seasons is out of our control, inevitable, and not really a matter which should exercise our minds that much. We should rise about the weather, avoid tedious weather reports, and concentrate on the things which really matter.

The joys of summer, as William Shakespeare wrote are short-lived –“And summer's lease hath all too short a date” (Sonnet 18)

My poem consciously picks up from the Bard and reflects on the same theme-

“Tempted to rejoice,
I feel much more the chastening.

Spring in its turn
is short-leased, winter hastening.

All Nature's seasons have their pain.
All human life must wax and wane.”