

WE BEGIN THE YEAR WITH MARCESCENCE

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We begin the year with marcescence, my gardener friend tells me. Marcescence is the act of trees holding onto dead leaves. Withered and brown and presumably useless to the tree, the leaves are allowed to stay. Many plants are marcescent, though nobody knows exactly why: palm trees keep their withered fronds. Agaves allow desiccated spears to stand sentinel around the young, fresh, green shoots. Here in the Northeast, in January's deep freeze, oaks still rattle with last year's leathery foliage. When walking through the winter woods, bleak and gray, the beech trees rattle with pale fire. They cling on until a strong wind takes them, or new buds pushing up force them to eventually fall.

It's a strange way to begin, I think. It feels more like something that won't end, an interruption to senescence, which seems to me should be the natural process: all things must come to an end. But in the barren landscape of early-year winter, what clings is what we know. Everything else is gone or dormant, reduced to its simplest state. Here, in winter's starkness, is something to define our point in time. A remembrance. A resistance.

And so, horticulturally speaking, we begin the year with a defiance of sorts.

It is the time of year where my husband holds my face between his hands and tells me the days are getting longer now. *It will get better from here.* He kisses me more. He holds me tighter. He buys me sweater dresses and encourages me embrace interiority. He points out how at 4:30 in the afternoon we can still see the shadow of light on the horizon, the sun's weak attempt at illumination hovering like a blue strip. *But blue is a shade of darkness*, I say. *It's light*, he says. *I can see it.* I know this is hard for him. Being the optimist is usually my role. But he sees me in my darkness.

My gardener friend and I meet at the coffee shop in winter to talk about the language of gardening. She is the expert, and I am her ghostwriter. Her ideas travel through me and I turn them into

coherent sentences, small wisdoms, and it feels an apropos task in this season of my hazy selfhood. We work together to express what, exactly, her role is as a person who tends to plants, the land. It is more than just a gardening report: she is building a philosophy.

We begin our sessions by consulting the Japanese calendar of microseasons. A different season every five days, seventy-two seasons of the year, with names that sound like lines of haiku. February's first seasons are: *East wind melts the ice* and *bush warblers start singing in the mountains*. They are hopeful seasons, a bit ahead of what we have here in New England, but a glimpse of what is to come. It helps us, the gardener and me, to think about the year as a slow progression but progression nonetheless, even when starkness has struck us stone cold.

It happens every year. Most years, I don't know it's happened until April or May, when I wake up suddenly and feel myself a degree more alive than I was the day before. I feel the sun and I feel my body recharged. Like Popeye after he's downed a can of spinach, his biceps bulging like cute little knots in twine. In recent years, however, I notice it more when the darkness comes. Is it getting worse? Or am I just better at knowing it happens? The sun only emerges when it is single-digit cold. Most days begin and end in the same gray haze, continually crepuscular. There seems little definition between waking and sleeping. I do less. Feel less.

Years ago, before she was my friend, my gardener friend was my boss. I dug earth. Forked soil. Hauled compost. Forked compost into soil. Forked grass to reveal soil to make new gardens. Dug plants out and moved them around. When people ask about my gardening years, I remember first the brute labor, the callouses, the pain shooting down my shoulders at night. The rote, mechanical activities that comprised my day to day. But my body remembers the plants, as though they've always been a part of me. Tending to plants is in my muscles' memory, my fingers quick



Ryan Kittleman

to pluck a wilted flower. Prune dead wood. Dig up and divide. Transplant. I do these things intuitively, without much thought, like the way I work a brush through my daughter's tangled hair or slice open an avocado, smacking the knife into the pit and twisting to dislodge it from the fruit.

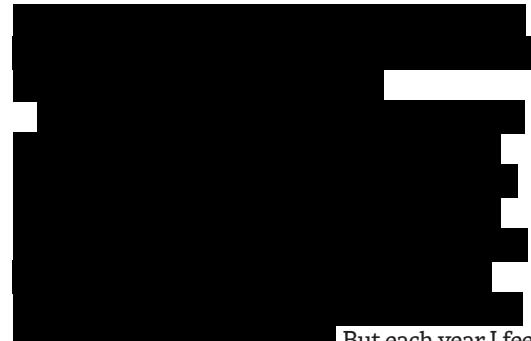
We are wilder than we think we are, the gardener says one day, trying to articulate this second-nature way we have when it comes to plants.

It is because of my friend that my kitchen garden happens each year, a task I don't think much about, just do: fork the earth, lay some compost, plant the plants, mulch, and water. Let it do its thing. Some years I do it all from seed. Other years I cheat, buying starts from the farm store down the road where the nursery keeper also tends to rescue animals: a llama named Elvira, a pony named Blueberry, a sad-looking pig whose eyes are disappearing into his flesh and who wants so desperately to be touched.

Because of my friend, I still have the wayward volunteers and re-potting leftovers I salvaged from greenhouses: the begonia (cultivar "Striped Kitten") that I kept for years and that grew lush, that I divided and doled out to friends and family members; a terrestrial orchid that gives me one speckled bloom each winter the colors of a sunset (the light, perhaps, I lack). I still have the staghorn fern she gave me when I quit gardening to go back to school. What was then a few leaves emerging from a four-inch pot is now a massive mound, three feet tall. Its smooth, cream-colored disks grow over and around the pot. Visitors always ask about it, stroke its velvet leaves. Sometimes it pains me to look at it because it reveals how much time has passed, as does my gardener friend's once-red hair that is now partly shimmering silver. It is because of her that I understand how to recognize when a houseplant is light-starved, the leaves turning pale and yellowish, the stalk listing out and over the edge of the pot reaching desperately for the window.

Now we sit and talk about February. Create a way to explain to her audience what a gardener does in these frozen months of dormancy. What work she is doing in the greenhouse. What the land and plants outside are doing. How not doing is important as doing when it comes to tending the earth. How the art of *tending to* requires a particular restraint.

I tell my husband that I know I love him, but in these days of darkness I sometimes cannot feel it.



But each year I feel myself toeing the line, teetering on the edge of a dark abyss, wondering what it would take to fall.

February, my friend says, *is between dormancy and beginning*. In the greenhouse during this time of year, she is forcing: the horticultural term for making plants bloom early. *I call it cheating spring*, she says. She cuts whips of witchazel and brings them into the warmth and they blossom, their snaggled yellow blooms like dozens of tiny explosions, each so sweetly fragrant. She does this with forsythia, quince. She forces bulbs, making them warm too soon so that slender green sheaths emerge. There are the winter bulbs: paperwhites and amaryllis, and the spring bulbs: hyacinth and crocus and daffodils. Here, in the warmth of the greenhouse, the seasons lose their boundaries.

But if you force too early, you risk etiolation, she says. If something grows too quickly, before it is ready to grow, before there is enough of the light it needs, the cell walls will be too thin. It is pale and weak and unstable. Etiolated can also mean to lose vigor, substance. To be feeble. Maybe one can't really cheat spring after all.

We are all etiolated, I can't help thinking this time of year. February. I think of etiolated seedlings, like the ones I sometimes plant too early, their filamentous stalks reaching weakly, risking collapse. *Put me outside*, they beg.

I'm sorry, I say. *But the ground is still frozen. You will die out there.*

But we're going to die in here, they say.

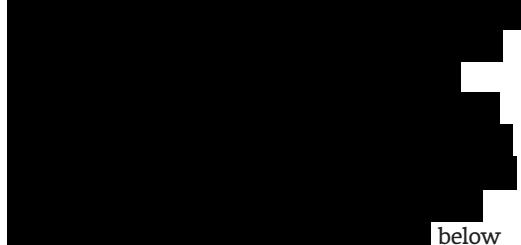
I'm sorry, I say. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

Who doesn't understand, on some intuitive level, the feeling of being light-starved? Those yellow leaves were referred to as chlorotic, I learned, back when I used to care for houseplants. They lack the light to produce enough chlorophyll, their green fading to a yellowish. It was my job to rotate the houseplants each week, giving each leaf its turn in the best light.

Chlorotic is also the historic word for hypochromic anemia in humans, where the red blood cells are paler than normal resulting in the complexion taking on a sickly greenish hue.

Seemingly more common in adolescent girls, it was once referred to as the disease of virgins. It was believed that living with men and copulating cured it.

Sometimes, when we've gone a long time without

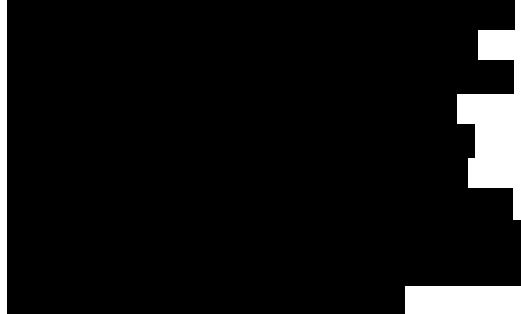


below the layers of darkness, of deep winter's sleep, something is alive.

Fish emerge from the ice, goes February's third microseason. And the fourth: *Rain moistens the soil*.

I search, halfheartedly, for any research that suggests suffering SAD might be good for a person. That it might be a part of the process of living—at least for those of us who choose to live at latitudes like this. Perhaps I'm looking for references to hygge, for suggestions to embrace the darkness, for someone to say that, hey, maybe we should not always be alert and on and ready to go. I'm looking for a reason to sleep more. An excuse to stay shut down for a bit. A breath. A break. Maybe, some scientist has discovered that we need the darkness in order to appreciate the light; maybe we can't have vigor without periods of numbness. But according to the internet it's only a problem. I find the suggested treatments. I'm warned about weight gain and oversleeping. I'm warned of listlessness and loss of focus. And most of all, I'm warned about diminished sex drive.

Chlorotic, chlorotic, put your hands all over my body....



Sundowning refers to a neurological phenomenon most commonly experienced by those exhibiting delirium or dementia. The confusion tends to set in in the late afternoon or early evening as the sun starts to set, as natural light fades and

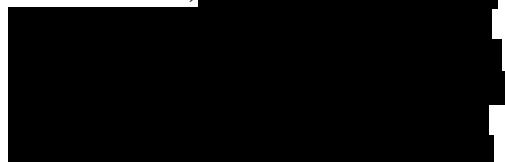
shadows grow. I sometimes tell my husband I am sundowning, even though I know I'm not using the term correctly. I do not experience anything akin to delirium. But it is the word that comes to me when I feel something inside me power down. I think of cartoon eyes transformed into window shades, Jerry pulling down the strings of Tom's eyelids and winking at us as Zzzzs start to float up above Tom's head.

One February, in my second or third year of motherhood, I was at a friend's house, a little cabin tucked in the snowy woods. We were celebrating her son's birthday when a bird clock went off, one of those ones that has a different songbird for each hour, and I felt suddenly like I'd been dunked in cold water. I sat upright, a part of my brain suddenly awakened, my eyes seeing more than they had a moment before as though a nictitating membrane had been clouding everything and suddenly had slid back into the recesses of my head to reveal the world in crystal focus. How long had I gone without hearing real birds? How long had I been living in a state of somnambulism? And how was it that this mechanical bird song had played such a trick on my mind? Was it really so easy?

It reminded me of what I'd learned once about the brains of songbirds: each spring, a certain part of the brain swells and grows. This is the part that creates and comprehends song, which is required for territory, nesting, mating, and protecting. In the fall, as the bird prepares to migrate, that part of the brain, which requires too many calories to keep inflated, shrivels again. Each year it regenerates and senesces, like a perennial plant. Was it possible that my brain, as well, has been senescing all these winters? Shriveling unto itself, and then regenerating, proliferating?

You would be forgiven to think that plants grow towards the light. But just as much, they grow away from the dark. Growth begins in the dark. I start my garden seeds in the dark warmth of my basement, near the boiler, and it's only once they've sprouted that I expose them to light. A plant, I think, is a delicate choreography that can only happen on the surface, up towards the light, down towards the darkness, the two forces propelling the thing to be.

When my daughter was an infant, I'd lay a finger gently on the corner of her mouth and she would turn to me,



way by feel, babies, too, don't need eyes to know. It makes me wonder about the subtlety of life in the dark, how it is the darkness that hones our sense of feel. In darkness, we can still detect what we need and we list towards it, hungry and hopeful.

I think often of the instinctual motion that I watched my gardener friend do year after year when I worked for her. I have this perpetual image of her kneeling down to the ground and using two fingers of one hand to part the old dead leaves of some plant. As she did this, new growth was revealed. Sometimes, it was just the tiniest, curled up cotyledons. Sometimes, they were not even green yet, still pre-chlorophyll, leaves curled like the limbs of a sleeping kitten. Maybe it was the silver hairs on the stem of hepatica. The pink nubs of peonies. A curled fiddlehead. She would part the old, dead leaves and say, *See? It's happening.*

It makes me think of egg candling, the way you can see the bird forming inside the shell. The way my daughter's figure emerged humanish upon the ultrasound screen. The way I sometimes lie awake in the morning, always the first one up, detecting my husband shifting, shifting again, then again, his turning from this side to that becoming more frequent until he's finally awake. I think of how when I feel like it's taking forever for my beans to sprout I sometimes dig them up to look for the white curl of a sprout emerging, the bean splitting in half to make way for new life. We're eager for things to awake, to begin. But we cannot force them.

Once she'd shown me the new growth, my friend would let go and the dead leaves would fall back again, covering it up. Best to keep it that way, the old like a blanket covering the new. Because the new growth was vulnerable, still raw and tender in this earliest phase of emergence. It depended upon the old and dead to keep it safe.

The final microseason of February is *mists start to linger*. I wonder at this—what did they do before they started to linger? Did they appear and then disappear, like a light being turned on and off? It's as mysterious a pronunciation as the gardener's statement that there is a phase between dormancy and beginning, a pre-beginning of sorts, a feeling that something is about to start but hasn't yet.

But then I think, maybe this makes sense. It starts to linger, and then one day, we're wrapped in a full-on fog, the moisture in the air a pronouncement of the end of winter dryness. Because after the mist starts to linger, *grass sprouts, trees bud*, and then, *hibernating insects surface*. We all start to surface. We all come up from the cold soil, our bodies transmuted from winter's sleep to this new form, coaxed into being by waxing sunlight but tempered by the dark.

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