

Frogs, Thornbills, Crimson Leaves and Cycla-Men: The Many Enchantments of the Natural World

By Helen Elliott

Easter was sublime here in the country. It was cold at night and the days remained crisp. The family were staying for a few days and because there were babies and toddlers the house needed to be kept warm, mostly by the open fire that astonished the children. They all live in centrally heated houses.

Outside the garden was modestly, quietly preparing itself for winter. The golden ash no longer dazzled along the drive but its leaves made a russet eiderdown for the bright shoots of bulbs beneath. The huge maple by the creek still flies banners of crimson and orange and the children gasp at the size of the leaves. And the shapes. They hold them out against the palms of their hands and make us

look. They have seen leaves in books but not like this, scattered across the grass, tumbling in the water.

Two of the children are old enough for an Easter egg hunt, and on Easter Sunday with the mist still blooming above the tallest gums, bundled into their coats, their crazy pink gumboots and cherry- red hats they waited by the kitchen door holding their new buckets. Their parents each hold a swaddled, rosy-checked baby and everyone is wondering where a rabbit might leave eggs. Had I glimpsed him that very morning? Fat? Silver fur? Tall brown ears and a great puff of a tail? I had a few suggestions about where he might have been.



I was right. Over by the fence where the climbing rose is finishing the season with a few tawny buds amongst the crowd of rosehips two perfect golden eggs are lying. The little girl's joyful screams pierce the morning air startling two birds out of hedge. They flap vertically into the sky. Where else would that rabbit go, the children wonder? Under the Irish strawberry? Or maybe if they bent down and lifted the tips of the branches of the Chinese elm where it sweeps the earth and crept into that glade they'd find something? Again their screams of delight, again their sparkling faces.

Olivia rushed to the first of the jelly bushes, certain that the rabbit would have been there. She was enraptured by the jelly bushes because when you shook them, or polished them they wobbled like jelly! To us they are common English box bushes but they're shaped like small urns and are just the right height for a three year old to shake. Alas, not one golden egg wobbled from the deep green urns.

And nothing was found in the old fountain except an upturned pot. Nothing? Well, there was a tiny striped frog. Half lime and half olive. The girls wondered if he had a name. And shouldn't he live in the pond?

More shrieks of pleasure and amazement split the air when they find eggs lying in the drifts of miniature cyclamen under the tall gums near the creek. Later that morning they picked three white and two lilac cyclamens to put in a tiny glass. They look like little girls with their hair blowing back, said Olivia. Why are they called cycla "men"?

Under the lemon tree they found eggs pretending to be lemons, and two more were found under the wide leaves of the hellebores as they settled themselves into a brief autumn sleep before their July flowering. The girls stood beside the snowy white Japanese

anemones gleaming along the path in the wild garden. The flowers were as fresh, as innocent as their faces. But the rabbit hadn't left any eggs near them. Instead they found the tiniest Thornbill, lying still, his eyes were dull, his round little chest speckled and soft, his tail straight and stiff. He was one of the same birds that shimmered about the fuchsia and salvia that they watched from the bedroom window. Was he too cold they wondered, solemn with awe, aware they were sad.

Their solemnity lasted a few moments because their buckets were full and they were happy. They rushed inside, triumphant. Those inside, sitting by the amazing fire told them they could map their progress around the garden by their shrieks and screams.

Later we all went out to check for the frog. He was still there. Then we gathered as much of the bark that had fallen across the lawns and paths because, I explained, dry bark is great to kindle the fire. I brushed a small spider off the jacket of the three year old as she struggled with her armful of bark. "Grandma, it's only a spider," she said.

They all left that night driving back to town into the evening. I beat on the window of my son's car as they were leaving. "Watch for kangaroos!" I shouted. He laughed.

It has been the Easter we had imagined when, at a stage when most people are moving into smaller city places, we bought a larger house in a larger garden. Growing up we took the harmony of a garden like this, trees like this, frogs, birds, water, gathering firewood, autumn *itself*, the fall into the suggestion of winter, for granted. The world was reliable splendor and, hopefully, my grandchildren might remember something of the enchantment of the natural world.



Helen Elliott is a thoughtful and analytical reader, informed and soulful writer and unyielding literary critic for many Australian newspapers. She is also a dedicated gardener.