

January

Sunday 1

Prospect Cottage, its timbers black with pitch, stands on the shingle at Dungeness. Built eighty years ago at the sea's edge — one stormy night many years ago waves roared up to the front door threatening to swallow it ... Now the sea has retreated leaving bands of shingle. You can see these clearly from the air; they fan out from the lighthouse at the tip of the Ness like contours on a map.

Prospect faces the rising sun across a road sparkling silver with sea mist. One small clump of dark green broom breaks through the flat ochre shingle. Beyond, at the sea's edge, are silhouetted a jumble of huts and fishing boats, and a brick kutch, long abandoned, which has sunk like a pillbox at a crazy angle; in it, many years ago, the fishermen's nets were boiled in amber preservative.

There are no walls or fences. My garden's boundaries are the horizon. In this desolate landscape the silence is only broken by the wind, and the gulls squabbling round the fishermen bringing in the afternoon catch.

There is more sunlight here than anywhere in Britain; this and the constant wind turn the shingle into a stony desert where only the toughest grasses take a hold — paving the way for sage-green sea kale, blue bugloss, red poppy, yellow sedum.

The shingle is home to larks. In the spring I've counted as many as a dozen singing high above, lost in a blue sky. Flocks of greenfinches wheel past in spirals, caught in a scurrying breeze. At low tide the sea rolls back to reveal a wide sandbank, on which seabirds vanish like quicksilver as they fly close to the ground. Gulls feed alongside fishermen digging lug. When a winter storm blows up, cormorants skim the waves that roar along the Ness — throwing stones pell-mell along the steep bank.

The view from my kitchen at the back of the house is bounded to the left by the old Dungeness lighthouse, and the iron grey bulk of the nuclear reactor — in front of which dark green broom and gorse, bright with yellow flowers, have formed little islands in the shingle, ending in a scrubby copse of willow and ash dwarfed and blasted by the gales.

In the middle of the copse is a barren pear tree that has struggled for a century to reach ten feet; underneath this a carpet of violets. Gnarled dog roses guard this secret spot — where on a calm summer day meadow browns and blues congregate in their hundreds, floating past the spires of nettles thick with black tortoiseshell caterpillars.

High above a lone hawk hovers, while far away on the blue horizon the tall medieval tower of Lydd church, the cathedral of the marshes, comes and goes in a heat haze.

A sky blue borage plant in flower, one of a clump that self-seeded by the back door. It droops in the early morning frost but recovers quickly: 'I borage bring courage.'

Thursday 5th

The first crocus is out in the front garden, one of the corms I planted last year in little pockets of peat in the shingle. It struggled to open all morning, finally drawing the sunlight to itself as the sun disappeared behind the house.

Monday 9

Planted roses: Rugosa double de Coubert Harrisonii, Rosa mundi — a selection of old roses from Russell's in Earls Court. By the time I have finished there will be over thirty scattered in clumps through the garden, disrupting its wildness as little as possible.

I arrived at dusk in the nursery set in its little square under the plane trees — it's a romantic place. Walking around in the deepening gloom through the rows of plants you are drawn into dreams of long summer days, looking at the ageing photos above each plant. Rosa mundi, rose of the world, with its crimson and blush striped flowers, an old sport from the apothecary's Rose officinalis the rose of Provins. It was brought back by a 12th century crusader and immortalised by Guillaume de Lorris in his poem the Roman de La Rose. When I took my roses to pay for them I found my old friend Andre manning the till. He laughed at the idea of my wilderness garden.