

SUZANNE STEWART  
**SPRING TIDE**

EVERYWHERE I LOOK, new spring growth is moist and full, heavy with liquid life. Leaf buds are tiny and still tight, like diminutive roses in green, not yet unfurled. Everything looks inward, intent on its own slow growth, heaving with time. Nothing lifts, just yet, in the movements of the fresh spring air.

This waiting, at first, is an interlude. Then time quickens in a flash. May is a month of mystery and miracles—a moment in the seasonal year of fervent expectation.

“The most generally interesting event at present is a perfectly warm and pleasant day,” Henry David Thoreau said of May, as if it were a month of ease. But that’s too simple. Under its placid surface, May is restless. It waits for the opportunity to surge and gush.

The ancient Greeks had a word for this: *kairos*. While *chronos* refers to measurable periods of time—hours, days, months, and years—*kairos* offers a more fluid concept of “the right time.” It acknowledges the occurrence of something *in* season, in due time, or at an “advantageous” moment. *Kairos* belongs to May—to the fullness of time.

William Wordsworth, too, must have had May in mind when he conceived of the poetic imagination as a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”—feelings, he wrote, that spring from “emotion recollected in tranquility.” May overflows in this spontaneous, powerful way at some point after the initial “tranquility”—the “pleasant day.”

On the first Saturday in May the Antigonish Farmers’ Market opens again after its closure during the winter. The sliding barn-like doors at the front of the 4-H building are pushed to the side, and people stream in even at eight o’clock. Excitement is effusive.

I ride my bike up the gravel slope right to the entrance and prop it against the vertical side beam, leaving my pannier bags on my rack. My bike



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belongs here now, I tell myself. As I write my *Book of Seasons* I have (almost) become part of the market, knowing people's lives and stories, their homes and land, which the market tables on their own can't tell. Still, I am not one of them. I watch, listen, and write rather than labour. My bike straddles the entrance, the back wheel out, the front wheel in. Like me, the bike is poised at a threshold.

Today all of the vendors are talking about last winter and its unusual harshness. Jack MacLeod tells me that herds of deer damaged his apple orchard. An icy-firm surface had formed after a heavy snowfall, followed by rain. Jack watched the deer from his window (and felt his heart break, I can tell) when they came in the middle of the night, walked on the top of three feet of snow, and tore off the lower branches of his trees.

"They got *something* out of the bark," he says, puzzled by this act of cruelty. "The deer chewed the branches, then left them behind."

In his quiet, measured way, Jack looks forlorn. Apple trees produce half of their fruit in the bottom third of the tree, and he will lose a quarter of his crop this year. But the deer couldn't have known; they were simply hungry after an unseasonably long winter. Jack has prepared himself for careful pruning—for a hard start to the spring.

As he talks, he takes off his cap and puts it back on repeatedly, almost rhythmically, with the utterance of each thought. It's a nervous gesture, I think, that suits the anxiousness of his mind right now. But he is rested, his face less strained than when I visited his orchard, La Dolce Terra, last autumn, after the late-harvest fatigue had set in. He also wears a red-and-white checkered shirt, a t-shirt under that, a down-filled vest over both, and a jacket on top of all three. The effect is casual—a new look for spring—but he is still guarded and layered against the cold.

As I step back from Jack's table, I stay to listen to his conversation with Casey Van de Sande, the farmer to his left, as he sets out his sign: CASEY'S VEGETABLES. They grow similar crops, but Casey doesn't have an orchard and he wasn't devastated by the deer. They converse about the mystery of spring planting. Jack, with his hands in his pockets, assesses the situation with his serious, steady mind, careful not to presume too much.

"I'm ready to move the transplants outdoors," he says, "but we need a couple of really warm days."

"The peas might be first," Casey thinks, "and then the kale," but, for now, he's still watching the frost at night.

I listen to these two quiet men, who are visibly out of sorts. They shrug their shoulders with casual indifference, but they look restless and on edge, and I can sense the anxiousness in their minds. Their empty trucks sit behind them, backed up to the tables that display only what's left of last autumn's harvest: carrots, onions, squash, dried kale, dried beans, and apple cider. This is all they've got left as they wait, watch, and interpret the weather with speculative eyes, wanting the planting to begin again.

All year, I have watched the harvests revolve. At any point on the seasonal circle some crops stay dormant while others fully mature. One farmer's completion is the next farmer's anxious wait. The warmth that Jack and Casey need for spring planting brings an end to Jason Haverkort's maple syrup harvest, and Mario Swinkels' bees emerge in the time in between.

I like this rhythmic cyclicity, but I don't know how to thread it through my life. Even in May, my days are squared: I measure time in blocks, like the schedules that order my teaching for eight months of the year. Now I read and write, but I still work with timeframes, sticking to deadlines. (What would happen if I tossed off *chronos* and gave in to *kairos*?)

Inside the market building, I find more traces of last autumn: Gala apples, sweet potatoes, and parsnips. The interior feels cold and damp after the winter closure, and my breath puffs like steam, but I enjoy the autumn colours casting their warmth on the late-wintery look of things.

The parsnips are golden with age and a little crusted with dirt after having been in the ground for months. I accidentally find six small bags of them hidden in Veronica DeYoung's refrigerator.

"They're not worth putting out," she says.

But I love parsnips and haven't eaten them since December, when the market closed. Could I buy several bags?

"They're tender and sweet," Veronica admits, "and I want to get rid of them."

She mentions all of this casually and won't take any money, understating the miracle of the parsnips, now given away for nothing.

*Tender and sweet*, she said. Preserved since autumn and enriched by the winter, when time stopped in the cool dark air. Parsnips, like sweet potatoes and apples, sweeten with time.

"But how?" I ask.

Veronica doesn't answer. Maybe she doesn't hear. Everywhere I turn, farmers look to the future, not the past, as they wait for the miracles to

come.

In fact, I do know: cold weather forces and strengthens a richness of taste. That's also what Mario said about bees that endure the winter in outdoor hives. A period of inactivity in the cold makes them stronger in the spring. Sugar maple trees that grow in cold regions are like that, too, as they produce better sap after a period of dormancy. The trees' hibernation, like the bees' quiet clustering, enables them to survive in winter and flourish in spring.

Tranquility precedes creativity, Wordsworth said. Farmers, too, are watching and gathering strength as they wait for the planting to begin.

As I cycle home from the market, I think of Dorothy Wordsworth. In May 1800 she created a garden at her new home, Dove Cottage, on the edge of Grasmere in Cumberland County, northern England. She also started her *Grasmere Journal*. Gardening and writing went hand in hand.

That same month her brothers William and John "set off into Yorkshire," a departure that brought her to tears as she sat quietly "at the margin of the lake" in their absence. Dorothy's journal sprang from her loneliness and became a receptacle for her emotions: feelings of melancholy, sadness, and quietness that lingered in her heart throughout the month. Unlike William, Dorothy didn't aspire to be a poet. She discovered the beauty of prose, its rhythmic lilt, which suited the delicacy of her perceptions: "The valley all perfumed with the Gale and wild thyme."

While her brothers were away, Dorothy's garden, like her writing, also sprang into being. As she planted flowers, she named them in her journal, preserving the garden and the process of its creation in the crispness of her prose.

May was cool that year. Dorothy still needed an evening fire, and she was relieved when the coals arrived. All the same, she was anxious to be outdoors, observing and naming all the wildflowers she encountered in the woods. She created her new garden by transplanting these flowers to her home. "I carried a basket for mosses, & gathered some wild plants," she wrote.

When not transplanting wildflowers, she "hoed the first row of peas," "weeded onions & carrots," or "watered" her plants. More restfully, in the evenings, she "sauntered a little in the garden."

*Gathered. Transplanted. Planted. Watered. Worked. Hoed. Weeded.*



*Sat. Sauntered.* Dorothy's verbs express the intimate relationship that she cultivated with her garden in May. Her love for her brothers, while they were still away, was temporarily transferred to this open-air sanctuary behind her home—an elevated slope of terraced land that enabled her to stroll quietly back and forth. In stillness, she also “wrote letters” in her garden.

For three years (in August, not May) I visited Dove Cottage and walked through her garden. I was a more serious academic then, presenting papers at the annual Wordsworth Summer Conference. The conference began each year in the garden at night, and we would tour the cottage and the terraced land behind it by candlelight. From this elevation, Dorothy would have had a view during the day of Grasmere Lake and the rounded valley in which it sits. On the first evening in Grasmere, I always looked up rather than down at her flowers, which I couldn't see in the dark. I was enchanted, instead, by the pale blue and yellow light above the mountains, which was perfectly clear in the cool northern air. “Unclouded and brushed with a little grey dust,” I wrote in my journal. The sheep sang in the silence.

Our nocturnal vigil at Dove Cottage reenacted the Wordsworths' lives, as William and Dorothy would walk late into the night, usually to watch the moon, and then go to bed. Dorothy recorded the day's events in her journal only after this final excursion: “A very fine moonlight night.”

The conference delighted me, and the beauty of its setting refreshed me. Papers were interspersed with long, five-hour hikes on rugged terrain in dramatic weather. William and Dorothy were great walkers on the low roads, in the woods, or along the lakes, and we would retrace their sturdy footsteps, glimpsing this world through their eyes. I often preferred the hikes to the papers. The impressions of the landscape “sank down / Into my heart and held me,” as William described his own experiences of Grasmere Vale.

I remember the details even now: sun-drenched rain, spotted light, shifting shadows, flat-backed mountains, inconstant weather, soggy wet boots, plum-coloured hills, blue-green valleys, tumbling white waterfalls, musical streams, damp cool skin, fields of purple heather, slippery wet rocks, spacious views from the mountaintops, and v-shaped crevices holding the mist. The hikes exhausted and exhilarated us, but we would rush to the evening papers with renewed vigour, more eager to learn, just as William and Dorothy walked for long periods of time and then sat down to write.

I don't teach Romantic literature now, and I rarely go to the annual conference. Like Dorothy, I transplant, as I move ideas and poems from conferences and classrooms (where they grew in the past) to the privacy of my own journal. The garden is new and still fragile, but May is the time to start—to encourage growth.

It is the second week of May. As I walk along the rural roads around the town of Antigonish, I stop to look at the leaves, seeing freshness in the brightness of the colours: lemon and lime, in multiple shades, pale but exuberant, soft and not yet full. In spring, details hold beauty: fine distinctions, textures, tendrils, shapely ovals, and cascading clusters. The yellows and greens clump on last year's stiffened and dried-up browns, while bits of rusty-red, lively and fresh, emerge in between. More and more colours will spill, loosen, and untighten. But when?

"It seems to take but one summer day," Thoreau said, "to fetch the summer in." A "rare and beautiful flower," which we have neither seen nor known, will appear miraculously "in our immediate neighborhood." In May, the mind, too, he thought, reaches "further off," as it discovers that "the boundaries of the actual are no more fixed and rigid than the elasticity of our imaginations."

Sure enough, the bees (like the flowers) come out on May 15. The day is warm, and I decide to leave my desk, get on my bike, and find the hives.

In April Mario told me that he places some of his bee colonies in an estuary of Antigonish Harbour, a wildlife sanctuary known locally as "the landing." This two-kilometre stretch of low-lying land, infused with warmth in the mid-day sun, sits on the east side of the town. As a thin strip of wilderness, where salt and fresh water mix, it offers a refuge for migrating birds and ducks.

As I cycle along the gravel path, I see bright yellow dandelions, the bees' principal source of nectar and pollen. The dandelions are thick, thriving among weeds, grasses, and other wildflowers that are slower to appear.

The gravel path stops at the far end of the sanctuary, but I can't find the hives. Mario hadn't said where to go, and I regret that I didn't ask, but just as I turn to leave I spot three rectangular wooden boxes with drawer-like handles in a small clearing surrounded by a ring of shrubs and gnarled, boney (still leafless) trees. They are hidden, set back from the path that

skirts the water's edge but still near enough to the estuary to receive the moist movement of ocean air. I push my bike through the tangled growth and see a sanctuary within the estuary: a wooded circle within the water's harbour that holds the bees—and now me, a quiet guest at the door of their home. The hives are so secluded that they can only be seen by the light of the sun—and by Mario, when he comes. Would he mind that I am standing so close to his hives? I am alone, without the voice of the beekeeper, writing the story of the bees on my own. Perhaps I am a thief, stealing Mario's words and his place in these woods.

Each box has been painted in white or olive green, the colours of spring, muted by the texture of wood underneath. Hundreds of bees cluster around the vent holes, each one the size of a dime. Some of the bees are intimate, brushing each other as they file tightly through the holes. Others leave the hives, circle, and fly away. As I look up, I try (but fail) to follow their spiraling lines as they ascend and depart like miniature kites, loving (I imagine) the liberty of flying through the sky. What explains their contrariness? Clusters of bees cling to the exterior surface of the hives as they snuggle to get in, tightly wedded to the community, while others soar away, scattering far from home.

No bee stays still, but I remain motionless, crouching on the ground now, wondering if any of them will land on me. Unafraid, I move a little closer—eight feet away—and kneel down again. Fragrance hangs in the air, coming and going as the current changes, surrounding me with its deliciously moist honey sweetness. Last autumn's leaves lie in clumps, the dryer ones on top, slightly tossed by the air. The ground is straw-yellow but damp and soft. Still dressed for winter, I feel the heat of the sun on my sweater and my ungloved hands, as I enjoy the movement of the breeze on the first really warm day of the month.

I remember Thoreau again. "The most generally interesting event at present is a perfectly warm and pleasant day," he said of May. Yes, in its middle, May is, at last, a month of ease.

But the bees have come out, and I think of Wordsworth, too: the "spontaneous overflow of powerful" things.

"In May, they're really booming," Mario said. "Then they start to slow down in mid-June. The spring burst is the exciting time."

Bees build in May. They need pollen and nectar to make the comb, which feeds the baby bees inside the hives, enabling the swarms to grow.



They multiply by tens of thousands with a daring sense of largeness, as May offers them the freedom to flourish.

As I step closer—five feet away now—I see the bees' shadows. Their small dark forms—elongated and thin, like a squashed oval—make patterns on the green and white surface of the hives. The bees move twice: in the air and on the wood, the shadows echoing and doubling their lively activities in the mid-day sun. Light is the essence of their being. They move about in restless circles as if to cast off their dark, shadowy second selves. But shadows anchor them to the hive, making them conscious of their weight and reminding them to come home.

My time here is coming to an end, as I have to return to my work. I stand up stiffly but linger and wonder. What would I feel if I were to slip inside the bees' sense of time by staying here for the rest of the afternoon until the bees come home at night? Could I watch their movements for hours—their circularity, interconnectedness, playful meandering, and rhythmic alterations of coming and going? The bees are purposeful but free, patterned but varied, filled with contrary beauty as they rush and then pause. I can't trace where they go when they leave their hives, as their movements become lost in the light, but I look up one last time to see them in the soft blue sky, shooting everywhere with quickness. Do they ever land on these unsprung leaves? Where will they go—and how far—for their pollen?

As I ride away, I feel the fullness of May. The movement—spring tide—has begun.

I think again of Thoreau. "The first crickets," he said, "chirrup" in May. When their sound "falls on my ear," it "makes me forget all else." Even late spring rain is "especially agreeable" when we can "hear the soothing dripping on the leaves." Simple sounds, he thought, are "good for thought."

On the final day of May, the clouds ripple like sand. Rain has been falling for most of the morning. A fine mist fills the air (with no distinct drops), as if the ocean's water were spilling upwards and over our heads.

Yesterday I went out in the noon sun and stopped at a magnificent pink tree in the garden near my office. I stood underneath it, looking up, and the tree sprayed its petalled beauty around me like a fountain of colour. Hundreds of small round pink and white blossoms, ruffled on the edges and creased with little folds, turned like wheels in the wind, as if they might roll off the tips of the branches and into the air. Is it a plum tree or a fruit tree of



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another kind, I wondered, with its pale pink and almost-white blossoms?

“Are you lost?” someone asked.

I didn’t hear footsteps or see anyone open the heavy wooden doors on the building nearby, the oldest structure on campus. The garden embellishes the historic beauty of its architecture.

“I’m looking at the tree,” I replied, somewhat sharply, and the curious intruder walked away. Couldn’t he see that I had found a beautiful burst of late-spring colour: a delicate floral shower? I wasn’t lost, just oblivious to time, my mind enthralled with a reverie, a brief excursion from the world, interrupted too soon.

The gardener later identified it as Weeping Higan Cherry. But what is happening to the tree today in this dripping rain? As I sit inside at my desk, my eyes thirst for its lovely pink sweetness. Is the tree still standing, colouring the air?

I leave my office again and go out in the rain, but this time I stop at the magnolia trees. They are blooming too, in pink and purple and white. Some of the blossoms stay tightly twisted, others begin to open loosely, and a few lie unravelled on the ground, as if trampled by the rain. I bend down to pick up one of the fallen flowers. The blossom separates in my cool, damp hands, the petals large and rubbery. Rose-coloured veins run up the centre of its milk-white interior, while a deeper purple-pink stains the outer side. I hold the folded magnolia flower in one hand, keeping it warm, rescued from the damp and rain-drenched ground. I stand, holding time.

*Are you lost?* I am prepared for the question this time, if it comes, but it doesn’t.

*Yes, I would say, I am pleasantly lost, oblivious to the rigours of worldly time, ravished by the rhythm of the seasons, as I slip inside the mystery of May while it slides with ease into June.*