



Oak leaves © kuzmaphoto / Shutterstock

The oak tree

Peter Reason agrees with poet John Clare that autumn is a “wild sorceress ... siren of sullen moods and falling hues”

Making the most of a short November day, I take a chance to visit the orchard to do some winter jobs. When, inevitably, grey clouds pile up and rain comes, I shelter in the shed, setting a garden chair so I can sit looking through the doorway while listening to the rattling of the tiled roof and the gurgling in the drainpipe. I have loved sheltering in a shed like this since I was a small boy; there is a palpable thrill at being where no one will find me, sheltered, yet quite intimate with the wetness.

Another growing season – budding, flowering, fruiting, harvesting – with all its excitements and disappointments has passed. The fruit trees have mostly dropped their leaves. Tall ash trees stand naked against the sky, bundles of keys hanging, bedraggled, from the ends of branches. But the leaves on the oak tree by the gate remain firmly attached, shining with an intense rich brown against the grey sky, even in the low light of a wet winter afternoon.

The following day, the morning sky is clear and blue with wisps of cloud. The low winter sun lights up the oak leaves in a kaleidoscope of colour, from bronze to bright yellow, with remaining hints of green. They rustle in the southerly breeze. I know the history of this oak. When my son Ben was a small boy, he picked up a sprouting acorn on a walk. We put it in a flowerpot, where it thrived; later, we planted it by the garden gate, tending it until it needed our care no longer. Forty years later, it is a strong tree, holding its own against

the taller ash and sycamore. It will surely outlive them. But from a gardening point of view it is in the wrong place: branches reaching over the flower beds, a highway for the squirrels who strip the apple and pear trees of unripe fruit.

Some might say we should cut the tree down before it gets too big and dominant, but I am deeply attached to it, with a strong sense of acquaintance. Apart from that, the tree itself clearly doesn't think it is in the wrong place.

Two days later, another beautiful sunny afternoon, now with a blustery wind. I pause under the ash tree and listen: a moaning gathers in the distance as a gust approaches. The clamour builds overhead, as branches creak, twigs rattle and whole trees sway dramatically, like a band of jazz saxophonists reaching an ecstatic climax. Jackdaws are out in force, seeming to love this weather, calling “kec-kec-kec” as they swoop across the sky. As the gust moves away to the east, relative calm returns: just the underlying moan and chatter of twigs in the fresh breeze. The golden-brown oak leaves that seemed so secure have been torn from their branches. Floating down, flickering in the sunlight as they fall, they pile up, thousands and thousands of them, against walls, under hedges, wherever there is calm. **R**

Peter Reason has collaborated with artist Sarah Gillespie to publish a booklet, *On Presence: Essays/Drawings*. peterreason.eu/OnPresence.html