



~ The PAGEANT of SUMMER ~

as Epic Found-Poem

~ Richard Jefferies ~

Edited & Introduction
RD Stapleford

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~ INTRODUCTION ~

The Pageant of Summer has often been cited as Jefferies' best essay, emblematic of all for which he stands. It has featured, over the decades, in many of his numerous anthologies and is one of his few essays to be published in its own right as a complete and sole piece (see end page listing).

Jefferies had a rare gift as a wordsmith, with a unique voice, giving a musical cadence to the fabulous composition of his phraseology. In this essay he seems to take a supreme delight in throwing words at a topic that lifted his heart. He subtly interweaves cascading descriptions of flora and fauna with occasional forays into the metaphysical dimension that speaks to the soul. For Jefferies, being immersed in nature was both sensory and spiritual. He rejoiced to paint pictures illustrating nature's propensity to feed the soul. He presents, through his most iconic writing, a *raison d'être* for mental health wellbeing via appreciation of the outdoors; mindfulness for our nature-cosmos environment, highlighted long before such terms achieved popular coinage. He was ahead of his time, a prophet of ecological spirituality, a religion free from religion, a divine essence beyond god-words, the natural forum for the state of awe and wonder that all and any may access at will. The *Pageant* essay is like a symphony, rising and falling with melodic musicality, that sweeps one along with its soundscapes. And so, it seems natural to present it as epic found-poem, for the joy of savouring its wordcraft. In addition to the poetic sentence-case capitals with each line, there is some selective capitalisation for poetic emphasis.

Like gold from the refiner's fire, *Pageant* was forged ironically amidst Jefferies' dying years of much suffering, in his 30-something otherwise prime. Mortal illness would claim him before reaching 40 but the notes of his soul, expressing a highest form of spiritual exultation in nature, remain, and grant his vision a certain immortality.

RDS
Ascensiontide 2026

Green rushes, long and thick,
Standing up above the edge of the ditch,
Told the hour of the year
As distinctly as the shadow

On the dial the hour of the day.
Green and thick and sappy to the touch,
They felt like Summer, soft and elastic,
As if full of life, mere rushes

Though they were. On the fingers
They left a green scent; rushes
Have a separate scent of green,
So, too, have ferns,

Very different from that of grass or leaves.
Rising from brown sheaths,
The tall stems enlarged a little in the middle,
Like classical columns, and

Heavy with their sap and freshness,
Leaned against the hawthorn sprays.
From the earth they had drawn its moisture,
And made the ditch dry;

Some of the sweetness of the air
Had entered into their fibres,
And the rushes—the common rushes—
Were full of beautiful Summer.

The white pollen of early grasses
Growing on the edge was dusted from them
Each time the hawthorn boughs
Were shaken by a thrush.

These lower sprays came down
In among the grass, and leaves
And grass-blades touched.
Smooth round stems of angelica,

Big as a gun-barrel, hollow and strong,
Stood on the slope of the mound,
Their tiers of well-balanced branches
Rising like those of a tree.

Such a sturdy growth pushed back
The ranks of hedge parsley in full white
Flower, which blocked every avenue
And winding bird's-path of the bank.

But the 'gix', or wild parsnip,
Reached already high above both,
And would rear its fluted stalk,
Joint on joint, till it could face a man.

Trees they were to the lesser birds,
Not even bending if perched on;
But though so stout, the birds
Did not place their nests on or against them.

Something in the odour of these
Umbelliferous plants,
Perhaps, is not quite liked;
If brushed or bruised they give out

A bitter greenish scent.
Under their cover, well shaded and hidden,
Birds build, but not against or on the stems,
Though they will affix their nests

To much less certain supports.
With the grasses that overhung the edge,
With the rushes in the ditch itself,
And these great plants on the mound,

The whole hedge was wrapped and thickened.
No cunning of glance could see through it;
It would have needed a ladder
To help anyone look over.

It was between the May and the June roses.
The May bloom had fallen, and
Among the hawthorn boughs
Were the little green bunches that

Would feed the redwings in Autumn.
High up the briars had climbed,
Straight and towering while there was a thorn
Or an ash sapling, or a yellow-green willow,

To uphold them, and then curving over
Towards the meadow. The buds
Were on them, but not yet open;
It was between the May and the rose.

As the wind, wandering over the sea,
Takes from each wave an invisible portion,
And brings to those on shore
The ethereal essence of Ocean,

So the air lingering among the wood and hedges—
Green waves and billows—became
Full of fine atoms of Summer.
Swept from notched hawthorn leaves,

Broad-topped oak-leaves, narrow
Ash sprays and oval willows;
From vast elm cliffs and sharp-taloned brambles
Under; brushed from the waving grasses

And stiffening corn, the dust of the sunshine
Was borne along and breathed.
Steeped in flower and pollen
To the music of bees and birds,

The stream of the atmosphere became
A living thing.
It was life to breathe it,
For the air itself was life.

The strength of the Earth went up
Through the leaves into the wind.
Fed thus on the food of the Immortals,
The heart opened to the width

And depth of the Summer—
To the broad horizon afar,
Down to the minutest creature
In the grass, up to the highest swallow.

Winter shows us Matter
In its dead form, like the Primary rocks,
Like granite and basalt—clear
But cold and frozen crystal.

Summer shows us Matter
Changing into life,
Sap rising from the earth
Through a million tubes,

The alchemic power of Light
Entering the solid oak;
And see!
It bursts forth in countless leaves.

Living things leap in the grass,
Living things drift upon the air,
Living things are coming forth
To breathe in every hawthorn bush.

No longer does the immense weight
Of Matter—the dead, the crystallized—
Press ponderously on the thinking mind.
The whole office of Matter is to feed life—

To feed the green rushes, and
The roses that are about to be;
To feed the swallows above,
And us that wander beneath them.

So much greater is this green
And common rush than all the Alps.
Fanning so swiftly, the wasp's wings
Are but just visible as he passes;

Did he pause, the Light would be
Apparent through their texture.
On the wings of the dragonfly
As he hovers an instant before he darts

There is a prismatic gleam.
These wing textures are even more
Delicate than the minute filaments
On a swallow's quill, more delicate

Than the pollen of a flower.
They are formed of matter indeed,
But how exquisitely it is resolved
Into the means and organs of Life!

Though not often consciously recognized,
Perhaps this is the great pleasure
Of Summer, to watch the earth,
The dead particles, resolving themselves

Into the living case of Life,
To see the seed-leaf push
Aside the clod and become
By degrees the perfumed flower.

From the tiny mottled egg
Come the wings that by-and-by
Shall pass the immense sea. It is
In this marvellous transformation

Of clods and cold matter
Into living things
That the joy and the hope
Of Summer reside.

Every blade of grass, each leaf,
Each separate floret and petal,
Is an inscription speaking of hope.
Consider the grasses and the oaks,

The swallows, the sweet blue butterfly—
They are one and all a sign
And token showing before our eyes
Earth made into Life. So that

My hope becomes as broad as the horizon
Afar, reiterated by every leaf,
Sung on every bough, reflected
In the gleam of every flower.

There is so much for us yet to come,
So much to be gathered, and enjoyed.
Not for you or me, now, but
For our race, who will ultimately

Use this magical secret
For their happiness. Earth holds
Secrets enough to give them
The Life of the fabled Immortals.

My heart is fixed firm and stable
In the belief that ultimately
The Sunshine and the Summer,
The Flowers and the azure Sky,

Shall become, as it were, interwoven
Into man's existence. He shall
Take from all their beauty and
Enjoy their glory. Hence

It is that a flower is to me
So much more than stalk and petals.
When I look in the glass I see
That every line in my face means pessimism;

But in spite of my face—
That is *my* experience—I remain
An optimist. Time
With an unsteady hand

Has etched thin crooked lines,
And, deepening the hollows,
Has cast the original expression
Into shadow. Pain and sorrow

Flow over us with little ceasing,
As the sea-hoofs beat on the beach.
Let us not look at ourselves but
Onwards, and take strength from

The leaf and the signs of the field.
He is indeed despicable
Who cannot look onwards to the ideal life
Of man. Not to do so

Is to deny our birthright of mind.
The long grass flowing towards
The hedge has reared in a wave
Against it. Along the hedge it is

Higher and greener, and rustles
Into the very bushes. There
Is a mark only, now, where the footpath
Was; it passed close to the hedge,

But its place is traceable only
As a groove in the sorrel and seed-tops.
Though it has quite filled the path,
The grass there cannot send its tops

So high; it has left a winding crease.
By the hedge here stands a moss-
Grown willow, and its slender branches
Extend over the sward. Beyond

It is an oak, just apart
From the bushes; then the ground
Gently rises, and an ancient pollard
Ash, hollow and black inside,

Guards an open gateway like
A low tower. The different tone
Of green shows that the hedge
Is there of nut-trees; but

One great hawthorn spreads out
In a semicircle, roofing the grass
Which is yet more verdant
In the still pool (as it were) under it.

Next a corner, more oaks,
And a chestnut in bloom.
Returning to this spot an old apple tree
Stands right out in the meadow

Like an island. There seemed just now
The tiniest twinkle of movement
By the rushes, but it was lost
Among the hedge parsley.

Among the grey leaves of the willow
There is another flit of motion;
And visible now against the sky
There is a little brown bird,

Not to be distinguished at the moment
From the many other little brown birds
That are known to be about. He got up
Into the willow from the hedge parsley

Somehow, without being seen to climb
Or fly. Suddenly he crosses
To the tops of the hawthorn
And immediately flings himself

Up into the air a yard or two,
His wings and ruffled crest making
A ragged outline; jerk, jerk, jerk,
As if it were with the utmost difficulty he

Could keep even at that height.
He scolds, and twitters, and chirps,
And all at once sinks like a stone
Into the hedge and out of sight

As a stone into a pond. It is
A whitethroat; his nest is deep
In the parsley and nettles. Presently
He will go out to the island apple tree

And back again in a minute or two;
The pair of them are so fond
Of each other's affectionate company,
They cannot remain apart.

Watching the line of the hedge,
About every two minutes, either
Near at hand or yonder a bird
Darts out just at the level of the grass,

Hovers a second with labouring wings,
And returns as swiftly to the cover.
Sometimes it is a flycatcher,
Sometimes a greenfinch, or chaffinch,

Now and then a robin,
In one place a shrike,
Perhaps another is a redstart.
They are flyfishing all of them,

Seizing insects from the sorrel tips
And grass, as the kingfisher takes
A roach from the water. A blackbird
Slips up into the oak and a dove

Descends in the corner by the chestnut tree.
But these are not visible together,
Only one at a time and with intervals.
The larger part of the life of the hedge

Is out of sight. All the thrush-fledglings,
The young blackbirds, and finches
Are hidden, most of them
On the mound among the ivy,

And parsley, and rough grasses,
Protected, too, by a roof of brambles.
The nests that still have eggs
Are not, like the nests of the early days

Of April, easily found; they are
Deep down in the tangled herbage
By the shore of the ditch, or far
Inside the thorny thickets which then

Looked mere bushes, and are now
So broad. Landrails are running
In the grass concealed as a man
Would be in a wood; they have nests

And eggs on the ground for which
You may search in vain till the mowers
Come. Up in the corner a fragment
Of white fur and marks of scratching

Show where a doe has been preparing
For a litter. Some well-trodden runs
Lead from mound to mound; they
Are sandy near the hedge where the particles

Have been carried out adhering to the rabbits'
Feet and fur. A crow rises lazily
From the upper end of the field, and
Perches in the chestnut. His presence,

Too, was unsuspected.
He is there by, far too frequently.
At this season the crows are always
In the mowing-grass, searching about,

Stalking in winding tracks
From furrow to furrow, picking up
An egg here and a foolish fledgling
That has wandered from the mound yonder.

Very likely there may be
A moorhen or two slipping about
Under cover of the long grass; thus hidden,
They can leave the shelter of the flags

And wander a distance from the brook.
So that beneath the surface of the grass
And under the screen of the leaves
There are ten times more birds than are seen.

Besides the singing and calling,
There is a peculiar sound which is only
Heard in Summer. Waiting quietly
To discover what birds are about,

I become aware of a sound
In the very air. It is not the midsummer
Hum which will soon be heard over
The heated hay in the valley

And over the cooler hills alike.
It is not enough to be called a hum,
And does but just tremble at the extreme
Edge of hearing. If the branches

Wave and rustle they overbear it;
The buzz of a passing bee
Is so much louder, it overcomes
All of it that is in the whole field.

I cannot define it, except by
Calling the hours of Winter to mind—
They are silent; you hear a branch
Crack or creak as it rubs

Another in the wood, you hear
The hoar frost crunch on the grass
Beneath your feet, but the air
Is without sound in itself.

The sound of Summer is everywhere—
In the passing breeze, in the hedge,
In the broad branching trees, in the grass
As it swings; all the myriad particles that

Together make the Summer are in motion.
The sap moves in the trees,
The pollen is pushed out from grass
And flower, and yet again these

Acres and acres of leaves
And square miles of grass blades—
For they would cover acres and square miles
If reckoned edge to edge—are drawing

Their strength from the atmosphere.
Exceedingly minute as these
Vibrations must be, their numbers
Perhaps may give them a volume almost

Reaching in the aggregate to the power
Of the ear. Besides the quivering
Leaf, the swinging grass, the fluttering
Bird's wing, and the thousand oval membranes

Which innumerable insects whirl
About, a faint resonance seems
To come from the very Earth itself.
The fervour of the sunbeams descending

In a tidal flood rings on the strung harp
Of Earth. It is this exquisite undertone,
Heard and yet unheard,
Which brings the mind into sweet

Accordance with the wonderful
Instrument of Nature. By the apple
Tree there is a low bank, where the grass
Is less tall and admits the heat

Direct to the ground; here
There are blue flowers—bluer
Than the wings of my favourite butterflies—
With white centres—the lovely

Bird's-eyes, or veronica. The violet
And cowslip, bluebell and rose,
Are known to thousands; the veronica
Is overlooked. The ploughboys know it,

And the wayside children, the mower
And those who linger in fields,
But few else. Brightly blue and surrounded
By greenest grass, imbedded in and

All the more blue for the shadow of the grass,
These growing butterflies' wings
Draw to themselves the Sun.
From this island I look down into the depth

Of the grasses. Red sorrel spires—
Deep drinkers of reddest Sun wine—
Stand the boldest, and in their numbers
Threaten the buttercups. To these

In the distance they give the gipsy-
Gold tint—the reflection of fire
On plates of the precious metal.
It will show even on a ring by firelight;

Blood in the gold, they say.
Gather the open marguerite daisies, and
They seem large—so wide a disc,
Such fingers of rays; but in the grass

Their size is toned by so much green.
Clover heads of honey lurk
In the bunches and by the hidden
Footpath. Like clubs from Polynesia

The tips of the grasses are varied
In shape: some tend to a point—
The foxtails—some are hard and cylindrical;
Others, avoiding the club shape, put forth

The slenderest branches with fruit
Of seed at the ends, which tremble
As the air goes by. Their stalks
Are ripening and becoming of the colour

Of hay while yet the long blades remain
Green. Each kind is repeated
A hundred times, the foxtails are succeeded
By foxtails, the narrow blades by narrow blades,

But never become monotonous;
Sorrel stands by sorrel,
Daisy flowers by daisy.
This bed of veronica at the foot

Of the ancient apple has a whole
Handful of flowers, and yet
They do not weary the eye.
Oak follows oak and elm ranks with elm, but

The woodlands are pleasant; however
Many times reduplicated, their beauty
Only increases. So, too, the Summer days;
The Sun rises on the same grasses and

Green hedges, there is the same blue Sky,
But did we ever have enough of them?
No, not in a hundred years!
There seems always a depth,

Somewhere, unexplored, a thicket
That has not been seen through,
A corner full of ferns, a quaint old hollow tree,
Which may give us something.

Bees go by me as I stand under the apple,
But they pass on for the most part
Bound on a long journey, across
To the clover fields or up

To the thyme lands; only a few
Go down into the mowing-grass.
The hive bees are the most impatient of insects;
They cannot bear to entangle their wings

Beating against grasses or boughs.
Not one will enter a hedge.
They like an open and level surface,
Places cropped by sheep, the sward by the roadside,

Fields of clover, where the flower
Is not deep under grass. *
It is the patient humble-bee that goes
Down into the forest of the mowing-grass.

If entangled, the humble-bee climbs
Up a sorrel stem and takes wing,
Without any sign of annoyance.
His broad back with tawny bar buoyantly

**Halfway delineation in the original prose between parts I and II.*

Glides over the golden buttercups.
He hums to himself as he goes,
So happy is he. He knows
No skep, no cunning work in glass

Receives his labour, no artificial
Saccharine aids him when the beams
Of the Sun are cold, there is no
Step to his house that he may alight

In comfort; the way is not made
Clear for him that he may start straight
For the flowers, nor are any sown
For him. He has no shelter if the storm

Descends suddenly; he has no dome of twisted
Straw well thatched and tiled
To retreat to. The butcher-bird, with
A beak like a crooked iron nail,

Drives him to the ground, and leaves him
Pierced with a thorn but no hail
Of shot revenges his tortures.
The grass stiffens at nightfall

(In Autumn), and he must creep where
He may, if possibly he may escape
The frost. No one cares for the humble-bee.
But down to the flowering nettle

In the mossy-sided ditch,
Up into the tall elm, winding
In and out and round the branched buttercups,
Along the banks of the brook,

Far inside the deepest wood,
Away he wanders and despises
Nothing. His nest is under the rough
Grasses and the mosses of the mound,

A mere tunnel beneath the fibres
And matted surface. The hawthorn
Overhangs it, the fern grows by,
Red mice rustle past. It thunders,

And the great oak trembles;
The heavy rain drops through the treble
Roof of oak and hawthorn and fern.
Under the arched branches the lightning

Plays along, swiftly to and fro,
Or seems to, like the swish of a whip,
A yellowish-red against the green;
A boom! A crackle as if a tree

Fell from the sky. The thick grasses
Are bowed, the white florets of the wild
Parsley are beaten down, the rain hurls
Itself, and suddenly a fierce blast

Tears the green oak leaves and whirls them
Out into the fields; but the humble-
Bee's home, under moss and matted fibres,
Remains uninjured. His house

At the root of the king of trees,
Like a cave in the rock, is safe.
The storm passes and the Sun comes out,
The air is the sweeter and the richer

For the rain, like verses with a rhyme;
There will be more honey in the flowers.
Humble he is, but wild;
Always in the field, the wood;

Always by the banks and thickets;
Always wild and humming to his flowers.
Therefore I like the humble-bee,
Being, at heart at least,

For ever roaming among the woodlands
And the hills and by the brooks.
In such quick Summer storms the lightning
Gives the impression of being far more

Dangerous than the zigzag paths traced
On the Autumn sky. The electric
Cloud seems almost level
With the ground, and the livid flame

To rush to and fro beneath the boughs
As the little bats do in the evening.
Caught by such a cloud, I have
Stayed under thick larches at the edge

Of plantations. They are no shelter,
But conceal one perfectly. The wood
Pigeons come home to their nest trees;
In larches they seem to have permanent

Nests, almost like rooks. Kestrels, too,
Come home to the wood. Pheasants crow,
But not from fear—from defiance;
In fear they scream. The boom

Startles them, and they instantly defy
The sky. The rabbits quietly feed on
Out in the field between the thistles
And rushes that so often grow in woodside

Pastures, quietly hopping to their favourite
Places, utterly heedless how heavy
The echoes may be in the hollows
Of the wooded hills. Till the rain comes

They take no heed whatever,
But then make for shelter. Blackbirds
Often make a good deal of noise;
But the soft turtle-doves coo gently,

Let the lightning be as savage as it will.
Nothing has the least fear. Man alone,
More senseless than a pigeon,
Put a god in vapour; and to this day,

Though the printing press has set
A foot on every threshold,
Numbers bow the knee when they hear
The roar the timid dove does not heed.

So trustful are the doves, the squirrels,
The birds of the branches, and the creatures
Of the field. Under their tuition
Let us rid ourselves of mental terrors,

And face death itself as calmly
As they do the livid lightning;
So trustful and so content with their fate,
Resting in themselves and unappalled.

If but by reason and will
I could reach the godlike calm
And courage of what we so thoughtlessly
Call the timid turtle-dove,

I should lead a nearly perfect life. *
The bark of the ancient apple tree
Under which I have been standing
Is shrunken like iron which has been

Heated and let cool round the rim
Of a wheel. For a hundred years
The horses have rubbed against it
While feeding in the aftermath.

The scales of the bark are gone
Or smoothed down and level, so
That insects have no hiding-place.
There are no crevices for them,

The horsehairs that were caught anywhere
Have been carried away by birds
For their nests. The trunk is smooth
And columnar, hard as iron.

A hundred times the mowing-grass
Has grown up around it, the birds
Have built their nests, the butterflies
Fluttered by, and the acorns dropped

From the oaks. It is a long, long time,
Counted by artificial hours
Or by the seasons, but it is longer
Still in another way.

**Anthologies 'Spring of the Year' and the 1997 'Life of the Fields' each conclude here. See back.*

The greenfinch in the hawthorn
Yonder has been there since I came out,
And all the time has been happily
Talking to his love. He has

Left the hawthorn indeed, but only
For a minute or two, to fetch
A few seeds, and comes back each time
More full of song-talk than ever.

He notes no slow movement
Of the oak's shadow on the grass;
It is nothing to him and his lady dear
That the Sun, as seen from his nest,

Is crossing from one great bough of the oak
To another. The dew even in the deepest
And most tangled grass has long since
Been dried, and some of the flowers

That close at noon will shortly
Fold their petals. The morning airs,
Which breathe so sweetly, come less
And less frequently as the heat increases.

Vanishing from the sky, the last fragments
Of cloud have left an untarnished azure.
Many times the bees have returned
To their hives, and thus the index of the day

Advances. It is nothing to the greenfinches;
All their thoughts are in their song-talk.
The sunny moment is to them all in all.
So deeply are they rapt in it that

They do not know whether it is a moment
Or a year. There is no clock for feeling,
For joy, for love. And with all their motions
And stepping from bough to bough,

They are not restless; they have so much time,
You see. So, too, the whitethroat
In the wild parsley; so, too, the thrush
That just now peered out and partly fluttered

His wings as he stood to look. A butterfly
Comes and stays on a leaf—
A leaf much warmed by the Sun—
And shuts his wings. In a minute he opens them,

Shuts them again, half wheels round,
And by-and-by—just when he chooses, and not before—
Floats away. The flowers open, and remain
Open for hours, to the Sun. Hastelessness

Is the only word one can make up
To describe it; there is much rest, but no haste.
Each moment, as with the greenfinches,
Is so full of life that it seems so long

And so sufficient in itself.
Not only the days, but life itself
Lengthens in Summer. I would spread abroad
My arms and gather more of it to me,

Could I do so. All the procession of living
And growing things passes. The grass stands up
Taller and still taller, the sheaths open,
And the stalk arises, the pollen clings

Till the breeze sweeps it. The bees rush past,
And the resolute wasps; the humble-bees,
Whose weight swings them along.
About the oaks and maples the brown chafers

Swarm, and the fern-owls at dusk,
And the blackbirds and jays by day,
Cannot reduce their legions while they last.
Yellow butterflies, and white, broad red admirals,

And sweet blues; think of the kingdom
Of flowers which is theirs! Heavy moths
Burring at the edge of the copse;
Green, and red, and gold flies:

Gnats, like smoke, around the treetops;
Midges so thick over the brook,
As if you could haul a netful;
Tiny leaping creatures in the grass;

Bronze beetles across the path;
Blue dragonflies pondering on cool leaves
Of water-plantain. Blue jays flitting,
A magpie drooping across from elm to elm;

Young rooks that have escaped the hostile shot
Blundering up into the branches;
Missel thrushes leading their fledglings,
Already strong on the wing,

From field to field. An egg here on the sward
Dropped by a starling; a red ladybird creeping,
Tortoise-like, up a green fern frond.
Finches undulating through the air,

Shooting themselves with closed wings,
And linnets happy with their young.
Golden dandelion discs—gold and orange—
Of a hue more beautiful, I think, than

The higher and more visible buttercup.
A blackbird, gleaming, so black is he,
Splashing in the runlet of water across the gateway.
A ruddy kingfisher swiftly drawing himself,

As you might draw a stroke with a pencil,
Over the surface of the yellow buttercups,
And away above the hedge.
Hart's-tongue fern, thick with green,

So green as to be thick with its colour,
Deep in the ditch under the shady hazel boughs.
White meadow-sweet lifting its tiny florets,
And black-flowered sedges. You must

Push through the reed grass to find
The sword-flags; the stout willow-herbs
Will not be trampled down, but
Resist the foot like underwood.

Pink lychnis flowers behind the withy stoles,
And little black moorhens swim away,
As you gather it, after their mother,
Who has dived under the water-grass,

And broken the smooth surface of the duckweed.
Yellow loosestrife is rising, thick comfrey stands
At the very edge; the sandpipers run
Where the shore is free from bushes.

Back by the underwood the prickly
And repellent brambles will presently present us
With fruit. For the squirrels the nuts are forming,
Green beechmast is there—green wedges under the spray;

Up in the oaks the small knots, like bark rolled up in a dot,
Will be acorns. Purple vetches along the mounds,
Yellow lotus where the grass is shorter,
And orchis succeeds to orchis.

As I write them, so these things come—
Not set in gradation, but like the broadcast flowers
In the mowing-grass. Now follows the gorse,
And the pink rest-harrow, and the sweet lady's bedstraw,

Set as it were in the midst of a little thornbush.
The broad repetition of the yellow clover
Is not to be written; acre upon acre,
And not one spot of green, as if all the green

Had been planed away, leaving only the flowers
To which the bees come by the thousand
From far and near. But one white campion
Stands in the midst of the lake of yellow.

The field is scented as though a hundred hives
Of honey had been emptied on it.
Along the mound by it the bluebells
Are seeding, the hedge has been cut

And the ground is strewn with twigs.
Among those seeding bluebells and dry twigs
And mosses I think a titlark has his nest,
As he stays all day there and in the oak over.

The pale clear yellow of charlock,
Sharp and clear, promises the finches
Bushels of seed for their young.
Under the scarlet of the poppies

The larks run, and then for change of colour
Soar into the blue. Creamy honeysuckle
On the hedge around the cornfield,
Buds of wild rose everywhere,

But no sweet petal yet. Yonder,
Where the wheat can climb no higher up the slope,
Are the purple heath-bells, thyme
And flitting stonechats.

The lone barn shut off by acres of barley
Is noisy with sparrows. It is their city,
And there is a nest in every crevice,
Almost under every tile.

Sometimes the partridges run
Between the ricks, and when the bats come out
Of the roof, leverets play in the waggon-track.
At even a fern-owl beats by,

Passing close to the eaves whence the moths
Issue. On the narrow waggon-track
Which descends along a coombe and is worn
In chalk, the heat pours down

By day as if an invisible lens
In the atmosphere focussed the Sun's rays.
Strong woody knapweed endures it,
So does toadflax and pale blue scabious,

And wild mignonette. The very Sun of Spain
Burns and burns and ripens the wheat
On the edge of the coombe, and will
Only let the spring moisten a yard or two

Around it; but there a few rushes
Have sprung, and in the water itself
Brooklime with blue flowers grows
So thickly that nothing but a bird

Could find space to drink. So down
Again from this Sun of Spain to woody coverts
Where the wild hops are blocking every avenue,
And green-flowered bryony would fain climb

To the trees; where grey-flecked ivy
Winds spirally about the red rugged bark of pines,
Where burdocks fight for the footpath,
And teasel-heads look over the low hedges.

Brake-fern rises five feet high;
In some way woodpeckers are associated
With brake, and there seem more of them
Where it flourishes. If you count the depth and strength

Of its roots in the loamy sand,
Add the thickness of its flattened stem,
And the width of its branching fronds,
You may say that it comes near to be a little tree.

Beneath where the ponds are bushy
Mare's-tails grow, and on the moist banks
Jointed pewter-wort; some of the broad bronze
Leaves of water-weeds seem to try and conquer

The pond and cover it so firmly
That a wagtail may run on them.
A white butterfly follows along the waggon-road,
The pheasants slip away as quietly as the butterfly flies,

But a jay screeches loudly and flutters
In high rage to see us. Under an ancient garden wall
Among matted bines of trumpet convolvulus,
There is a hedge-sparrow's nest

Overhung with ivy on which even now
The last black berries cling. There
Are minute white flowers on the top of the wall,
Out of reach, and lichen grows against it

Dried by the Sun till it looks ready to crumble.
By the gateway grows a thick bunch of meadow
Geranium, soon to flower; over the gate
Is the dusty highway road, quiet but dusty,

Dotted with the innumerable footmarks
Of a flock of sheep that has passed.
The sound of their bleating still comes back,
And the bees driven up by their feet

Have hardly had time to settle again
On the white clover beginning to flower
On the short roadside sward.
All the hawthorn leaves and briar and bramble,

The honeysuckle, too, is gritty
With the dust that has been scattered upon it.
But see—can it be? Stretch a hand high,
Quick, and reach it down;

The first, the sweetest, the dearest rose of June.
Not yet expected, for the time is between
The May and the roses, least of all here
In the hot and dusty highway;

But it is found—the first rose of June.
Straight go the white petals to the heart;
Straight the mind's glance goes back
To how many other pageants of Summer

In old times! When perchance
The sunny days were even more sunny;
When the stilly oaks were full of mystery,
Lurking like the druid's mistletoe

In the midst of their mighty branches.
A glamour in the heart came back to it
Again from every flower; as the sunshine
Was reflected from them, so the feeling

In the heart returned tenfold.
To the dreamy Summer haze, love
Gave a deep enchantment, the colours
Were fairer, the blue more lovely in the lucid Sky.

Each leaf finer, and the gross earth enamelled
Beneath the feet. A sweet breath on the air,
A soft warm hand in the touch
Of the sunshine, a glance

In the gleam of the rippled waters,
A whisper in the dance of the shadows.
The ethereal haze lifted the heavy oaks
And they were buoyant on the mead,

The rugged bark was chastened and no longer rough,
Each slender flower beneath them
Again refined. There was a Presence
Everywhere, though unseen,

On the open hills, and not shut out
Under the dark pines. Dear
Were the June roses then because
For another gathered. Yet even dearer

Now with so many years as it were
Upon the petals; all the days that have been before,
All the heartthrobs, all our hopes
Lie in this opened bud.

Let not the eyes grow dim,
Look not back but forward;
The soul must uphold itself like the Sun.
Let us labour to make the heart grow larger

As we become older, as the spreading oak
Gives more shelter. That we could but take
To the soul some of the greatness
And the beauty of the Summer!

Still the pageant moves. The song-talk
Of the finches rises and sinks
Like the tinkle of a waterfall.
The green-finches have been by me

All the while. A bullfinch
Pipes now and then further up the hedge
Where the brambles and thorns are thickest.
Boldest of birds to look at, he is always

In hiding. The shrill tone of a goldfinch
Came just now from the ash branches,
But he has gone on. Every four or five minutes
A chaffinch sings close by, and

Another fills the interval near the gateway.
There are linnets somewhere,
But I cannot from the old apple tree
Fix their exact place. Thrushes

Have sung and ceased; they will begin again
In ten minutes. The blackbirds do not cease;
The note uttered by a blackbird in the oak yonder
Before it can drop is taken up by a second

Near the top of the field, and ere it falls
Is caught by a third on the left-hand side.
From one of the topmost boughs of an elm
There fell the song of a willow warbler

For a while; one of the least of birds,
He often seeks the highest branches
Of the highest tree. A yellowhammer
Has just flown from a bare branch in the gateway,

Where he has been perched and singing
A full hour. Presently he will commence again,
And as the Sun declines will sing Him to the horizon,
And then again sing till nearly dusk.

The yellowhammer is almost the longest of all
The singers; he sits and sits and has no inclination
To move. In the Spring he sings,
In the Summer he sings, and he continues

When the last sheaves are being carried
From the wheat field. The redstart
Yonder has given forth a few notes,
The whitethroat flings himself into the air

At short intervals and chatters,
The shrike calls sharp and determined,
Faint but shrill calls descend
From the swifts in the air.

These descend, but the twittering notes
Of the swallows do not reach so far—
They are too high today. A cuckoo
Has called by the brook, and now

Fainter from a greater distance.
That the titlarks are singing I know,
But not within hearing from here;
A dove, though, is audible, and

A chiffchaff has twice passed. Afar beyond
The oaks at the top of the field
Dark specks ascend from time to time,
And after moving in wide circles

For a while descend again to the corn. These
Must be larks; but their notes are not powerful
Enough to reach me, though they would
Were it not for the song in the hedges,

The hum of innumerable insects, and
The ceaseless 'crake, crake' of landrails.
There are at least two landrails
In the mowing-grass; one of them just now

Seemed coming straight towards the apple tree,
And I expected in a minute to see the grass move,
When the bird turned aside and entered
The tufts and wild parsley by the hedge.

Thence the call has come without a moment's
Pause, 'craque, craque,' till the thick hedge
Seems filled with it. Tits have visited
The apple tree over my head, a wren

Has sung in the willow, or rather on a dead branch
Projecting lower down than the leafy boughs,
And a robin across under the elms
In the opposite hedge. Elms are a favourite

Tree of robins—not the upper branches,
But those that grow down the trunk,
And are the first to have leaves in Spring.
The yellowhammer is the most persistent individually,

But I think the blackbirds when listened to
Are the masters of the fields.
Before one can finish, another begins,
Like the Summer ripples succeeding

Behind each other, so that the melodious
Sound merely changes its position.
Now here, now in the corner, then
Across the field, again in the distant copse,

Where it seems about to sink, when it rises
Again almost at hand. Like a great human
Artist, the blackbird makes no effort, being
Fully conscious that his liquid tone cannot be matched.

He utters a few delicious notes,
And carelessly quits the green stage
Of the oak till it pleases him to sing again.
Without the blackbird, in whose throat the sweetness

Of the green fields dwells, the days
Would be only partly Summer. Without the violet,
All the bluebells and cowslips
Could not make a Spring,

And without the blackbird,
Even the nightingale
Would be but half welcome.
It is not yet noon, these songs

Have been ceaseless since dawn;
This evening, after the yellowhammer
Has sung the Sun down, when the Moon
Rises and the faint Stars appear,

Still the cuckoo will call, and
The grasshopper lark, the landrail's 'crake, crake'
Will echo from the mound,
A warbler or a blackcap will utter his notes,

And even at the darkest of the Summer night
The swallows will hardly sleep in their nests.
As the morning sky grows blue,
An hour before the Sun, up will rise the larks,

Singing and audible now, the cuckoo
Will recommence, and the swallows
Will start again on their tireless journey.
So that the songs of the Summer birds are

As ceaseless as the sound of the waterfall
Which plays day and night.
I cannot leave it; I must stay
Under the old tree in the midst

Of the long grass, the luxury of the leaves,
And the song in the very air.
I seem as if I could feel all the glowing
Life the sunshine gives

And the south wind calls to being.
The endless grass, the endless leaves,
The immense strength of the oak
Expanding, the unalloyed joy of finch

And blackbird; from all of them I receive
A little. Each gives me something
Of the pure joy they gather for themselves.
In the blackbird's melody one note

Is mine; in the dance of the leaf
Shadows the formed maze is for me,
Though the motion is theirs; the flowers
With a thousand faces have collected

The kisses of the morning.
Feeling with them, I receive some,
At least, of their fulness of Life.
Never could I have enough; never

Stay long enough—whether here
Or whether lying on the shorter sward
Under the sweeping and graceful birches,
Or on the thyme-scented hills.

Hour after hour, and still not enough.
Or walking the footpath was never
Long enough, or my strength sufficient
To endure till the mind was weary.

The exceeding Beauty of the Earth,
In her splendour of Life, yields
A new thought with every petal. The hours
When the mind is absorbed by Beauty

Are the only hours when we really live,
So that the longer we can stay
Among these things so much
The more is snatched from inevitable time.

Let the shadow advance upon the dial—
I can watch it with equanimity
While it is there to be watched.
It is only when the shadow is not there,

When the clouds of Winter cover it,
That the dial is terrible. The invisible shadow
Goes on and steals from us.
But now, while I can see the shadow

Of the tree and watch it slowly gliding
Along the surface of the grass, it is mine.
These are the only hours
That are not wasted—these hours that absorb the soul

And fill it with Beauty. This is real Life,
And all else is illusion,
Or mere endurance. Does this reverie
Of flowers and waterfall

And song form an ideal, a human ideal,
In the mind? It does; much the same ideal
That Phidias sculptured of man and woman
Filled with a godlike sense

Of the violet fields of Greece,
Beautiful beyond thought, calm
As my turtle dove before the lurid lightning
Of the unknown. To be Beautiful

And to be Calm, without mental fear,
Is the ideal of Nature.
If I cannot achieve it,
At least I can think it.

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- 1883 (June) included in Jefferies' publisher **Longman's Magazine**
- 1884 **The Life of the Fields**, anthology – Chatto & Windus; subsequent editions include 1947 Lutterworth (illus.)
- 1896 stand-alone eponymous title – Mosher, USA
- 1907 stand-alone eponymous title – Wellby (illus.)
- 1909 **Selections from Richard Jefferies**, anthology for schools, ed. F.W. Tickner – Longmans
- 1911 stand-alone eponymous title – Chatto & Windus
- 1935 **Out of Doors with Richard Jefferies**, anthology ed. Eric Fitch Daglish – Dent & Sons
- 1937 **Jefferies' England**, anthology, ed. Samuel J. Looker – Constable (with photographic plates)
- 1947 **Richard Jefferies** – *Selections of his Work with details of his Life and Circumstances, his Death and Immortality* - second edition only (first edition 1937 / '40 *sans Pageant*), ed. Henry Williamson – Faber & Faber
- 1979 **The Pageant of Summer**, anthology ed. Andrew Rossabi – Quartet Books
- 2001 **At Home on the Earth**, anthology ed. Jeremy Hooker – Green Books (illus.)
- 2019 **Richard Jefferies – a Miscellany**, anthology ed. Andrew Rossabi – Galileo

~ PARTIAL EDIT ~

- 1945 **A Richard Jefferies Anthology**, ed. George Pratt Insh - Collins
- 1946 **The Spring of the Year**, anthology ed. Samuel J. Looker – Lutterworth (illus.)
- 1997 **The Life of the Fields**, anthology (confusingly, the same title as the 1884 volume but different content) – Brockhampton Press (illus.)

~ EXTRACTS ~

- 1985 **Thoughts from the Writings of Richard Jefferies**, anthology ed. H.S.H. Waylen - Longmans
- 1903 **A Little Book of Nature Thoughts**, anthology ed. Thomas Coke Watkins – Mosher, USA
- 1906 **The Pocket Richard Jefferies**, anthology ed. Alfred H. Hyatt – Chatto & Windus
- 1940 **Readings from Richard Jefferies**, anthology for schools, ed. Ronald Hook – MacMillan

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