

Commentary on the poem 'Ember Days' by Mary Gilliland

Traditional Christian calendars contain days of fasting and prayer during the year's four Ember Weeks, which coincide with the first week of each season, and undoubtedly sit atop pre-Christian observance of solstices and equinoxes. The distinct tenor of those Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays has been pushed to the wayside, as have many traditional collective observances. It's a rare group of us that observes the change of seasons, or even nature itself. Fasting and prayer may well not be everyone's preferred *modus operandi*, but regularly shared rituals whether joyful or penitential do have a way of promoting social cohesion and reducing egoism.

During this poem's evolution, I imagined it taking place in London, my favorite city in the world, where, descending or rising on a Tube station escalator, there is plenty of time to observe large advert posters. Major cities are coveted sites of celebration, conviviality, gatherings – and also comings and goings at stations that are deserted, either usually or at certain hours, their outskirts littered, edges brushy.

Once in a while, when still young and seeking mother, a fawn will bleat. Most fawns are silent. I questioned the fawns on the page of this poem repeatedly, and I'm afraid they insisted on clucking. Then the poem's title arrived, and the fawns made sense to me.

'Ember Days' resides in a collection that was a finalist for the National Poetry Series and a number of other contests, and then shelved. From time to time, individual poems from the manuscript came to mind to be edited - which I did, at the poem's bidding. So I told myself that if or when I found that all the poems had done so (without making a project out of it), I'd re-create that original manuscript.

When *NDR* accepted this poem, I located the old table of contents and discovered that 'Ember Days' was the very last poem in that collection to come round, come clear. Ah! taking my own prompt, I have just reassembled a marvelous collection of poetry.