

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Iris

by Sue Hitchcock

It's perfectly formed now, the iris I'm planning to paint. I checked it several times yesterday, as the papery, brown covering of the bud began to split and expose the folded petals. Now the bud has completely opened, revealing its triangular formulation of three rising petals, called standards and three drooping petals called falls. I'll cut the flower now, before any pollinator can find it. Flowers move in the time it takes to make a watercolour. Some turn to the sun, like sunflowers, but they all move a bit.

Obviously buds open with warmth and water, to display their pollen and lure in helpful insects, but there is a moment of stillness, while they await their consumption. We cruelly cultivate double flowers, where the density of the petals prevents access for the pollinators – poor bees!, poor flowers! The flower's moment of stillness remains for our gaze until it fades, unable to suck up water any longer.

My iris probably would have been pollinated – it is of the “bearded” variety, having a furry pathway in the centre of each of its three falls, guiding insects to its stigma and stamens which are otherwise hidden by the three standard petals.

I take the iris, select a plain, glass vase for it and place it in front of the white board I use as a background. I wouldn't want to paint the room! Firstly I make a faint drawing of it, as accurate and invisible as possible. Next I decide which are the lightest colours and paint them with a thin wash.

The yellow of the beard on the petals must stand out and the colour will not be strong enough to effect the purple of the petal, if I go over the edge. As I go along using darker and darker colours, I must be more careful and use a very fine brush for some details.

The final treat, and quite a challenge is to show the intense, light-absorbing purple of the falls. Only the inside of the petals has this quality, the outside being slightly shiny. The rising petals have this pale shine and are reflecting the white of the card behind. The darkest purple is in the crinkles in the edge of the large falls, but I don't want to lose the overall sense of the deep purple petals.

At last after three hours, I must leave the painting. I am tired and my concentration has gone. Maybe I can come back to it this afternoon. The painting is not the flower, but it will remind me of it.