

# Nature Notes

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*A burr, pulled from a fleece.*



The iced planets of burdock looked like beautiful renditions of the spike-celled images that have haunted us all year. We squeeze past these plants at least twice daily, & carry their prickly mines around with us all winter, tenderly pulling them off one another's clothes in brief moments of Velcro silence: pinched burr-planets of nuanced smiles, gentle rue, love, tenderness and disappointment.



Outdoors takes us out of ourselves. Frozen oak leaves give up the ghost, like snow falling through the trees, and we try to pay more attention to the world. A squirrel's warning wheeze can sound like a hard pressed boot in thick, defrosting mud, and a snipe, tearing itself off the frozen earth, like the creak of the park gate – or a burr pulled from a fleece. These things live alongside us too. Often unnoticed.



Still, reliably, against the odds and diminishing, the song thrush and mistle thrush begin carolling in this deepest, darkest, most quietly light-seeking part of the year. The gleam off wet holly is profoundly blinding and there are still quinces in the hedge, like winter lemons; hanging like bright Christmas baubles.



It was a shock, in this border country, where we hang on like the grit on the kitten heel of the Berkshire 'shoe,' to find ourselves in Tier 3, then Tier 4 within two days, before Christmas. And then, much of the rest of the country following.



But there are deeply reflective, sobering (and joyful) walks home from Mum's house in the village. There are scattered strings and pulses of fairy lights, like boats anchored out at sea and Jupiter and Saturn like wonky twin porch lights, low over Tier 2. The muddy track is laced with shadowed branches & puddles are glazed with moonshine. There are disappointments, but none too great. I think of others.



A barn owl quarters unseen, but calls with the rare clarity of a glassy, ululating whistle, rather than its more usual rasped screech.



It is a little spooky, crossing the sheepwash. Dark badger trails criss-cross the fields either side like ley lines. I stupidly answer a text and the phone's light destroys a half hours' stored night vision and I am temporarily blinded. When I stop tramping through the frosted leaves on the wood's edge, the tramping continues a few beats. There is a ticking rustle from a big, silhouetted dead tree that hasn't produced leaves in decades. Its bark has long gone, leaving it antler-bone white. I wonder what the sound is? I imagine: bats walking down its trunk on folded elbows; a treecreeper roost; a stop-out squirrel. Then there is the terrible shrieking of a small animal that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. A rabbit being killed by a stoat, I think, until the sound is carried up above my head into the wood behind me. An owl? But what is the prey? My stopping is too much for the alert levels of the roosting wood pigeons and they explode with a volley of a racketing clatter. A shower of leaves fall. The shrieking has stopped.



As I recross my tracks there is a whiff of fox that wasn't there when I started out.





Nearing home, I pass the old threshing barn that once doubled as a draughty school room, but is now full to the rafters with hay made when we thought this would all be over by Christmas. Somehow, the church bells are ringing. The near-full moon is netted in the trees and there is a slow meteor like a yellow marble, rolled through the heavens. The plough rests the heel of its starry mouldboard on the roof of our house.

I pause before going in. If I met ghosts tonight, I would tell them of these times.

