

Nature Notes

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Weather. Station.



Strange and unsettling to wait so late into Winter before the first hard frost occurs. And in this mild, wet year, it comes as a relief; beautiful and normal in abnormal times. Because, everywhere is sinking into mud: fenceposts rotting, flints rising to the surface to lacerate boot soles and dog paws. The old barn roof is sagging; its estate, green-painted drainpipes, detached. The whole thing looks set to collapse over the museum of this farm's life: the pony trap, the long hay rack, the enamel sinks, old range stoves & tiles from renovated cottages. I want to rescue it all.



Taking my daughter to work though Hampshire hamlets and estate-owned villages, the winterbournes have risen. A horse's trough of an old bath tub floats. The cottage and pub thatches are dark with rain, except in light, repaired, spark patches. The signpost to Wildhern and Linkenholt sits upon its 'godcake' of a grass triangle, as it always has, and the pollard limes, and tiled, clunch-and-flint wall does another winter.



But for the first time this year, the ground feels hard underfoot, frozen perhaps to an inch below the surface and there is treacherous and unexpected ice on the roads. A hare has made prints in it, down the centre of the road through the village. The ice on the troughs, the birdbath and dog bowl is not thick.



Over the shallow flood pond in the park of The Big House, it isn't deep enough to take the dog's weight for long. She skitters across it gingerly, tail up, after her yellow 'stick' of hosepipe, enjoying the strangeness and play of it. She races and slides, then trots out towards the middle where it cracks as she lifts each foot. She is just about quick enough to be ahead of it, but the pressure on the wide surface of the saucerful, like a natural dewpond, sends out strange noises – a kind of electronic, synthesised pinging; a deep-sea, deep space sonar. Air pockets form under the ice and wobble out to the middle, moving and shape-shifting like jellyfish. They congregate in the middle, jostling up against each other like empty speech bubbles; like something waiting to be said, an exhalation from the earth.



On top of the hill, the view is as far reaching as it gets, until the landscape becomes geological layers of blue. I can see as far as Coombe Hill in The Chilterns. Frost thick as snow accumulates on our boots. A flock of fieldfare are backlit gloriously as they fly from hawthorn to hawthorn, checking again for missed berries. A mistle thrush sings loudly, a field away. It is a song both achingly bleak & full of the tang of a cold metal gate – yet suffused with determined, celandine warmth.



We come down through the stunted oaks where the first snowdrops have pushed through. In the lea of the wood, their hardened tips find little resistance, their pearls dangling like earrings, brightening the mud.



Later, after topping up the feeders, I watch the birds come in. The badger-striped head of a coal tit aligns with the striped, mouse-dun of a long-tailed tit & a goldfinch's chequerboard neatness, conspiring to make me smile. The steam from a mug of tea curls upwards and is matched by the breath purling from a dunnock on the fencepost. I can't hear him singing, but he is. The nuthatch comes in like an apricot bullet in a navy serge cape; the fierce black eye stripe aligning with his bill to elongate the dagger of it, giving him a serious, military air. There are fewer chaffinches. And no greenfinches this year.

At 4.30 in the afternoon, the disc of ice I removed from the birdbath in the morning is still intact; it's knobbly flint 'stepping stone' is set in the centre, like the boss on a shield. I hold it up to the stars, like a satellite dish. The defrosted grass crisps up again.



The thrush sings on. Venus & the half-moon hang above the barn, the down & the farm weather station. The instrumental alchemy of weather, time, land, space and use. A poem for the earth we stand alone on.

