

# EARTH WONDERING



WINTER

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It's about listening, wonder and fun. It's about revelling and wallowing, attending to pulse, cycle, rhythm. Being on this planet, influenced by the moon, remembering that our full address includes the solar system, the milky way, the universe. Being here, now, alive among rocks and ice, under this sky.

Why? Because, as the saying goes, 'the best things in life are not things'.

Kenneth White coins 'wunderstanding', but surely what matters is 'wonderstanding'.



Ice-time has come, footsteps crunch through the woods, dead leaves are brittle, all the water-based lives and water-sodden dead have step-danced into winter. Ripples on the pond have frozen into bird's wings, the great span of a goose, feathers of a robin, down of an owl.

the sound of a stone  
thrown at a frozen lochan

a bell's swung tongue  
bouncing  
still

In a clear sky, the crescent moon lags behind Venus. They're like a diamond pin and a broken button on a blue velvet lapel.



Sun sparkles through frost-jewelled birches. An otter has left footprints in the slush.

A woodcock, invisible until almost trodden on, batters away through a thicket of hazel.  
How does it not smash into the trees?

The frost is so beautiful I have no words for it.  
Two ravens call overhead, the view is even better up there.



After the glaciers retreated, what was this landscape like? Before the trees came, before the tundra vegetation grew, all the rocks stripped bare, all the previous aeons scraped clean away. Just boulders, scree and naked earth, rubbed raw, exposed and uninhabited. What would it have smelled like? How would it have sounded?

Squalls canter in from the Atlantic under a grey cloud canopy. I wonder how to become wilder – does it mean being changeable, full of energy and driven by oceanic forces? Where does serenity come into it? Merely as a mood between storms?

Emerson said no-one owns the landscape, but we do.

In Loch Roe a seal seems to hear us say 'no seals', and up bobs its head with that ever-curious expression. It submerges, then up again, down then up, each time a little nearer, each time gazing at us. Who are we to a seal, we strange land-legged, swimming, boating creatures?

We carry a washed up buoy back to the ranger's hut from the beach. The sheep on the machair are so bewildered by our games (space-hopper, football, etc.) that they form a glaiket, staring line, moving as one. Is there anything to like in sheep?

An African woman on the radio is a refugee from where the swallows winter. Birds seem to share this sphere more easily than we people do.

Storm. The caravan bangs and judders as gusts kick at it. The windows strain on their rusty clasps threatening to blow in, or out. Lumps of wind bump onto the roof and bounce off, sucking at our warm refuge as they go. Dragons, we call them.

A black sleepless night of storm, yet dawn is calm, the trees stand almost motionless as if pretending it never happened, all innocents after the wild night. Only their twigs, trembling, give anything away. But the sea roars outside the loch. The sea remembers.

I thank the sheep for all the socks.

Wind over tide: the great pulses.

When the glaciers melted they left stones in strange places: erratics, fragments of displaced rocks. Seas, rivers, lakes, streams, waterfalls all displace more, moulding stones. Frost and snow shatter others. The wind grinds some, tree roots a few. Over time they grow smaller. Is the total number on the increase? Or is there a law of conservation of stones: the new ones just sufficient to replace those that return to rock as conglomerates and sandstone?

How important dry sticks are on a cold, wet day.



The high sky is blue, lower down white, and at the horizon grey – as if proximity to earth makes it dirty. The grey clouds bring hail. Between showers the sun calmly melts the ice-balls, like a nanny mopping up after a bad-tempered child.

Hail blossoms on the loch. Foliage gestures sweep across its surface, decorating it with swirls and leafy stems. Blooms flame across the slate water, a brief lesson in floral design. Then wind wipes the slate clean.

A seal lies like a haggis on the bow. Bladderwrack is shredded cabbage in a sea of grey gravy. Driech, driech and nae tatties.



Rain doesn't reach the surface of the loch before being whipped up into sheets of spray, like mist on speed.

The weather seems to want to express all its possible selves, tell all its stories. It pours, blows and infuriates, and then it sets the water to silver and I forgive it everything.

Gulls soar above the shore switching black to white against a billowing backdrop of cloud.



seeking revelations in the woods  
finding moss  
not doing much

Honey bees work for no more than 3.1 hours per day.

Do less, better.

Lichens are the lingerie department of the store of life and the winter range is its wildest: lace in the woods, skin-hugging thermals on crags. The stand-outs are shocking lime and orange body-stockings on shore-side rocks, but my favourite is the green froth of pulmonaria petticoats worn by old hazel.

How does a woodpecker survive, braining itself against wood with such force? Does it have rubber buffering inside its skull?

Underground life is ticking along, worms digesting, pupae undergoing miracles of metamorphosis, roots growing strong.

Few sounds are as comforting as gentle rain on a caravan roof, few sights more mesmerising than the archipelago pattern of fresh water floating on the loch, edging its fractal way out to sea, pocked by raindrops.

Seals play: splashing and porpoising, humping on and off the islands, flicking bladderwrack with their mouths, blowing bubbles and making farty noises.

The cormorant's fishing expedition is a series of snake-headed ripple-circle dives, followed by a long rest.





