

## **I would be a stone**

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If you could be any other creature of our Norfolk landscape, what would you be? In the depth of winter, as December days fizzle to a few grey hours and temperatures plummet, it might feel a good idea to be someone who hibernates. Bats, for the most part, slumber the winter through, though during mild spells they may emerge to hunt. Snug in the heart of a hollow tree, or in a musty cellar, safe from the sharpest cold and spared the gloomy grind of these midwinter days, theirs appears an enviable life come mid-December. Equally, it might perhaps be nice to be a small tortoiseshell, folded beneath the rafters of a dry shed, among years of dust and cobwebs, waiting for early spring's first sun to wake you and send you seeking nettles on which to lay your clusters of green eggs, like gooseberries in a colander, upon a prickly leaf.

Or, if you prefer a little Christmas drama in your life, you could be a seal, on some wind-haunted Norfolk beach. Perhaps a grey seal bull, big-nosed and blubbery, patrolling a stretch of sand hard-won in bloodied combat, keeping his North Sea seraglio safe and stinking mightily the while. Or a pup, a vulnerable pup, moon-eyed, pumped up with fatty mother's milk, shedding its baby clothes of fluffy white, dodging the bulls' hormonal rampages, and soon to launch into the unknown sea and learn to be a seal.

The more contemplative might wish to be a tree, a peaceful witness to the passing centuries, roots plugged deep into the planet's history, into chalk rained by phytoplankton onto a seabed ninety million years ago, into sand raked across the landscape tens of thousands of years ago by giant ice sheets grinding southward from the pole, into precious, flimsy topsoil made by our small lives. To be a tree, yes: to give in every moment, to make the carbohydrates which feed every terrestrial ecosystem, to forge the oxygen powering every breathing organism, to replenish soil, to manage water, to be beauty before a million human retinas. Oh, to be a tree.

If you're canny, you may have chosen someone who migrates, who flees our short midwinter days and freezing nights. A swift perhaps, almost the first to leave, who checks out of the UK come mid-August, as soon as chicks are fledged. In December you and your dagger-winged band are throwing great sky-loops over Africa: now over sweaty western forests, now over spindly antelope and belching hippos of the eastern plain. A life lived always in warm skies.

I would be a stone, I think. Older even than a tree, stiller even than the soil, quieter than the timid field voles scurrying through forgotten mounds of grass, peaceful to my core.

It does us good to think of being other beings, to imagine, be it for a moment only, what other lives are like. Even discounting stones, no one has any idea how many species share our earth. How many mice, how many frogs, how many mosses, fish, ferns, weevils and bacteria? We know there to be millions, but we have no real idea how many millions, and expert estimates vary wildly. One thing is sure: among these countless glorious expressions of DNA, we are unique in having invented mortgages, in having saddled ourselves with overdrafts, in having espoused beliefs the having of which makes other humans enemies, in having done such catastrophic harm to all the other lives with which we share our home and to the very resources on which we ourselves depend. Looked at objectively, from beyond the baggage of bank accounts and politics and fashion trends and religion, which we all learn and all inevitably carry, we are a most egregious expression of life on earth.

For life, with which we share this earth, is wonderful. I wonder at the mole snuffling through the wet ground by the duckpond outside my house, swimming through the earth with giant feet and finding worms with its exquisite sense of smell. I wonder at the brittle stems of reed, gossiping to the winter wind at the pond's edge, and at their rhizomes, marshalling the bounty of last summer's sun, creeping through the mud to make more reed, more homes in spring for buntings and for warblers. I marvel at the willow, leaning crookedly beyond the reed, at how its hard buds bear the plans for next year's flowers, seeds, leaves and living. I marvel at it all.

Sometimes it seems to me that mortgages, elections, bank accounts and systems of belief are there to fill the void left when we forget simply to wonder at the natural world. If 2020 — long, grinding 2020 — has taught us just one thing it is to love the wonders all around us: December's keen wind on our faces, long-tailed tits twirling chattily through birches on our winter walks, fieldfares bouncing among fallen apples, dogs' tails wagging raindrops everywhere, the bright smiles of little loved ones. This December and this Christmas seem set to be like no others in our recent memory; but in our homes and gardens, down the lane and in the wood, on nature reserves and in tatty, forgotten corners all across our beautiful county, there are marvels. And, seen with wonder and with love, they are what we need to get us through.