

Seasons of Stories

# WINTER





Winter can be bleak and beautiful all at once.

The colours in nature fade into shades of browns and greens to greys, the once bountiful food supplies dwindle and a sense of quietness spreads across the land. Winter for many is a time to slow down, conserve energy and plan for spring's arrival, but if we look closely, we see buds on trees slowly begin to swell, and the first roots of snowdrops and bluebells take hold in the moist soil.

Worms travel deeper in the warmth of the soil, mammals snuggle together, and birds migrate. People behave in much the same way as nature, hunkering down in homes, facing sunlit windows, and gathering together to celebrate festivities while some head abroad for a dose of winter sunshine.

Chilly evenings that are overlooked by the brightest of starlit skies make way for crisp mornings blanketed in a glistening white frost. When we take the time to notice, there is a lot to rejoice in winter and everything around us seems to know that the world is turning, and that springtime is sure to come again soon.

Relax through these chapters of winter told through story, poetry, images and traditions, and enjoy how they make you feel, what they remind you of and any conversations or thoughts that open and unfold.





On St Martin's Day,  
winter's on its way.

Winter comes,  
fields clothed in mist,  
soon the storms  
their dark days bring -  
yet spring will come.

Adapted from an  
Old English verse.

■ How do you feel when winter comes?

Long-darkness winter  
Slippery-paths winter  
Grey-descends winter  
Low-sun-squints winter  
Count-the-dead winter  
Elders-remember winters  
Meet-me-if-you-dare winter  
Bang-the-drum winter  
Light-the-fire winter  
Story-the-night winter  
Sing-out-loud winter  
Outlast winter.

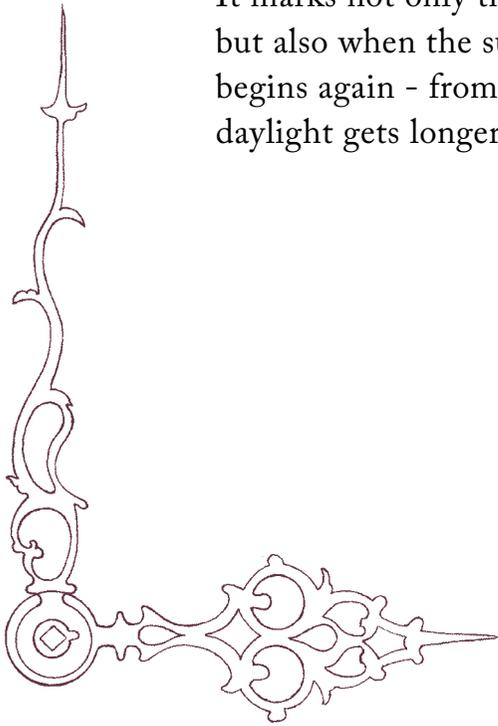


“Putting the clocks  
back signifies dark  
evenings and chilly  
mornings.”

# RETURNS

The winter solstice is midnight on the seasonal clock, when the solar year is reset.

It marks not only the longest night but also when the sun's journey begins again - from now on daylight gets longer.



## Old Wolf

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Who wakes before dawn?

Follows

The night, finds -

Footprints of what?

Beyond the town

Somewhere -

Slip into another being -

Precious with fur

And musk and hunger.

Out of sight -

What do you become?

A full moon in  
December was  
called the Moon  
of Long Nights

A full moon  
in January  
was called a  
Wolf Moon

A full moon in  
February was  
known as a  
Hunger Moon



- If winter was a wild animal what might it be?

FROST!

## Frost

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The evening quiet,  
The dusk arrives,  
Heralds long retreating.

For love of light,  
The red-fruit path,  
Is afternoon's very sweetening.

The star-cold night,  
Is mirror bright,  
Enters without knocking.

## Winter Treasure

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One white winter, a poor man had to leave his house to find firewood to keep his family warm. Slowly, he ploughed his way through the deep snow, until he came to a woodland of tangled trees. There he was able to trim some of the dead branches with his trusty, long-handled axe. By the time he'd gathered a big bundle of sticks, he was utterly frozen to the bone. So, he decided to build a little fire, before the long, cold trek home again. Soon the dry wood began to snap and crackle; the fiery flames bringing both warmth and good cheer. As the fire melted a circle in the snow, the poor man saw something glinting on the ground in the flickering light - a golden key.

'Where's there's a key, there's a keyhole,' he thought to himself. So he began to clear the snow with his boots, then prod the ground with his axe. Sure enough, the blade soon hit something else beneath the surface of the soil. Digging carefully, he unearthed a small iron chest. The man twisted the key in the lock and the lid sprang open.

And what treasure he found inside that box, you'll have to imagine for yourself.

## A riddle

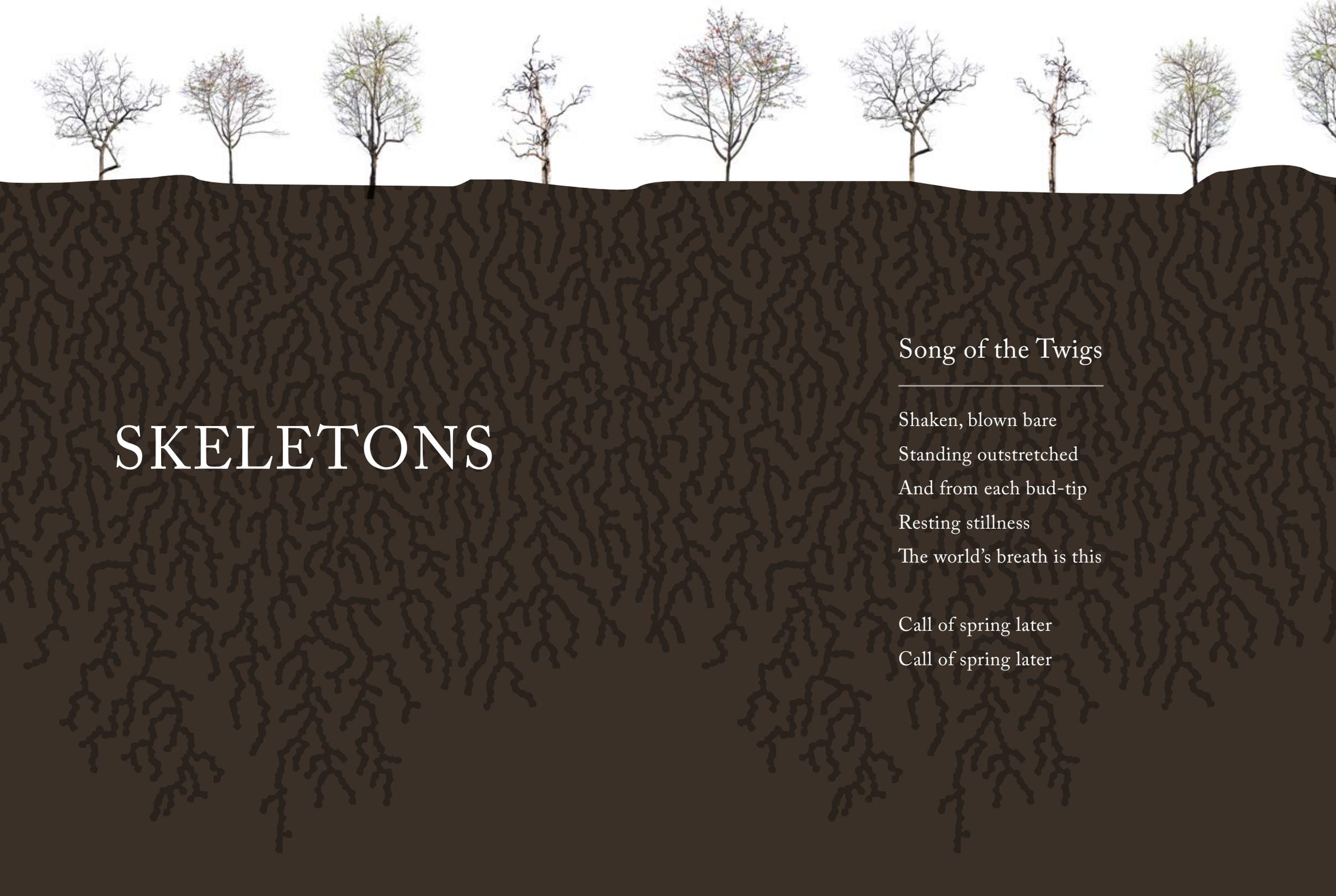
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I've got six arms, can swallow whole farms  
Yet it takes millions of me to make a man.



“Walking on crisp  
sunny days with  
sharp winter light.”

Old folklore says that when it snows,  
Old Mother Frost is shaking her feather pillows.



# SKELETONS

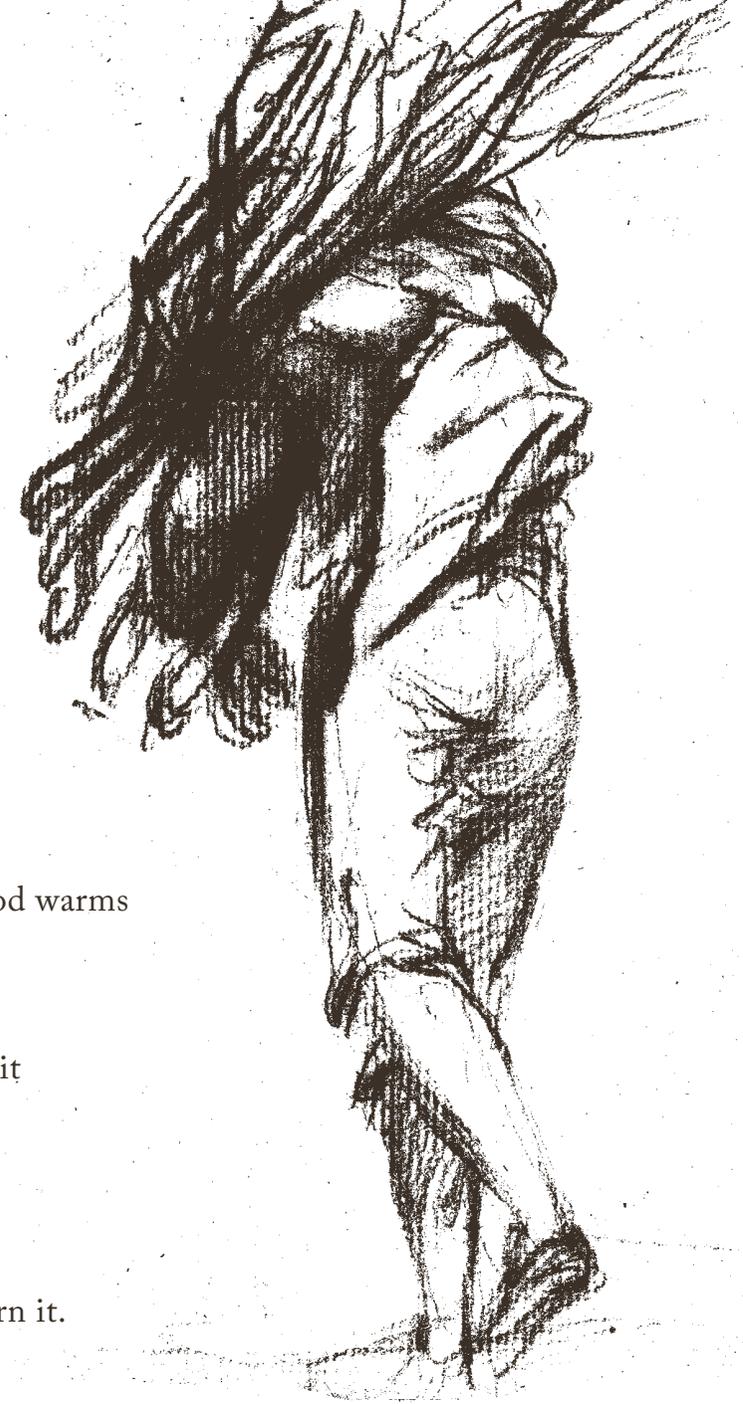
## Song of the Twigs

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Shaken, blown bare  
Standing outstretched  
And from each bud-tip  
Resting stillness  
The world's breath is this

Call of spring later  
Call of spring later

... The knee bone's connected to the thigh bone...



They say that wood warms  
three times:

when you collect it

when you split it

and when you burn it.

*Deck the halls with boughs of holly ...*

# EVERGREEN

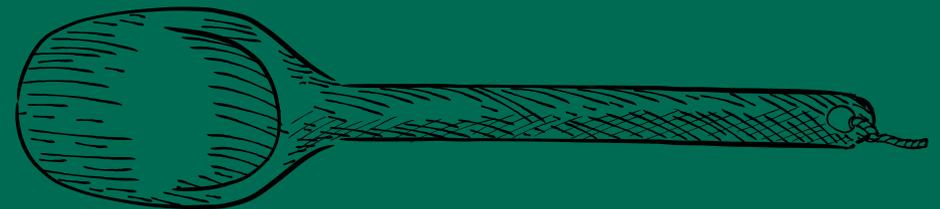
Bringing sprigs of evergreen vegetation into our homes is a long-standing tradition at this time of year.

They serve as symbols of life in winter's darkness, and that spring will return again through the cycling of the seasons.



Flour of England,  
fruit of Spain  
Met together  
in a shower of rain.

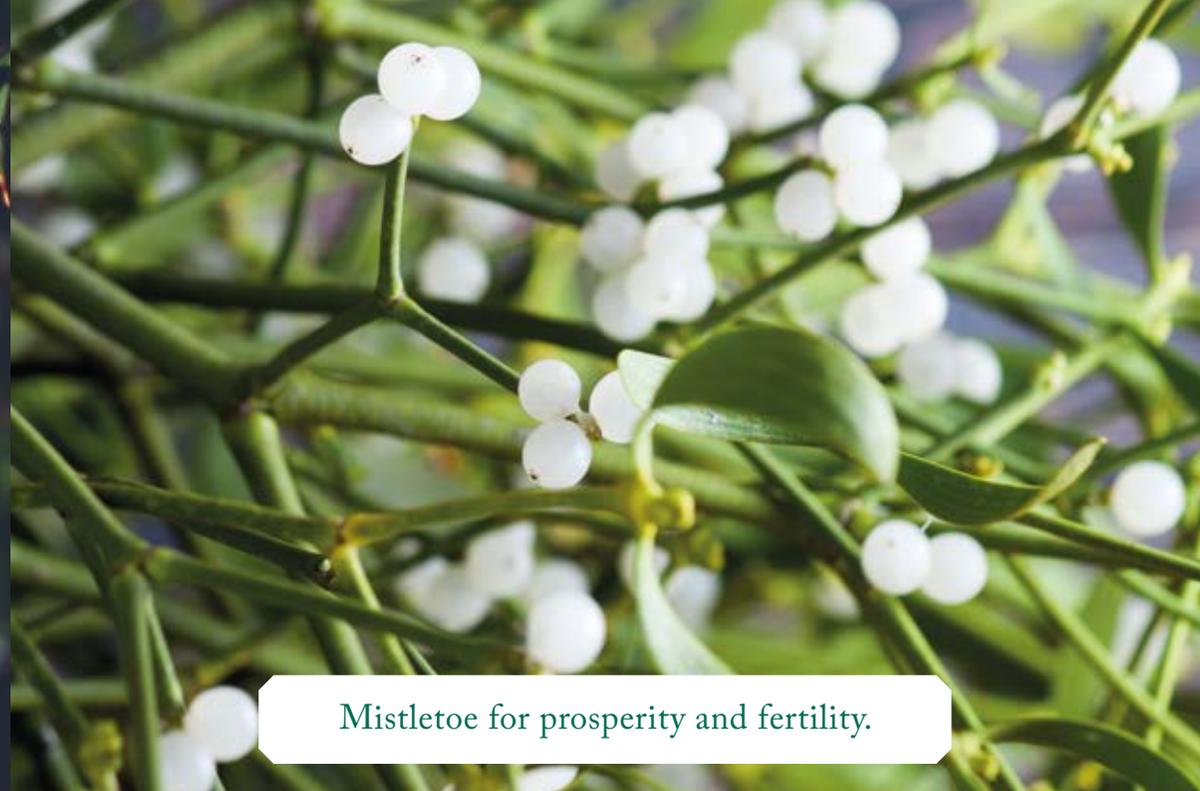
Put in a bag,  
tied with string  
If you answer this riddle,  
I'll give you a ring.



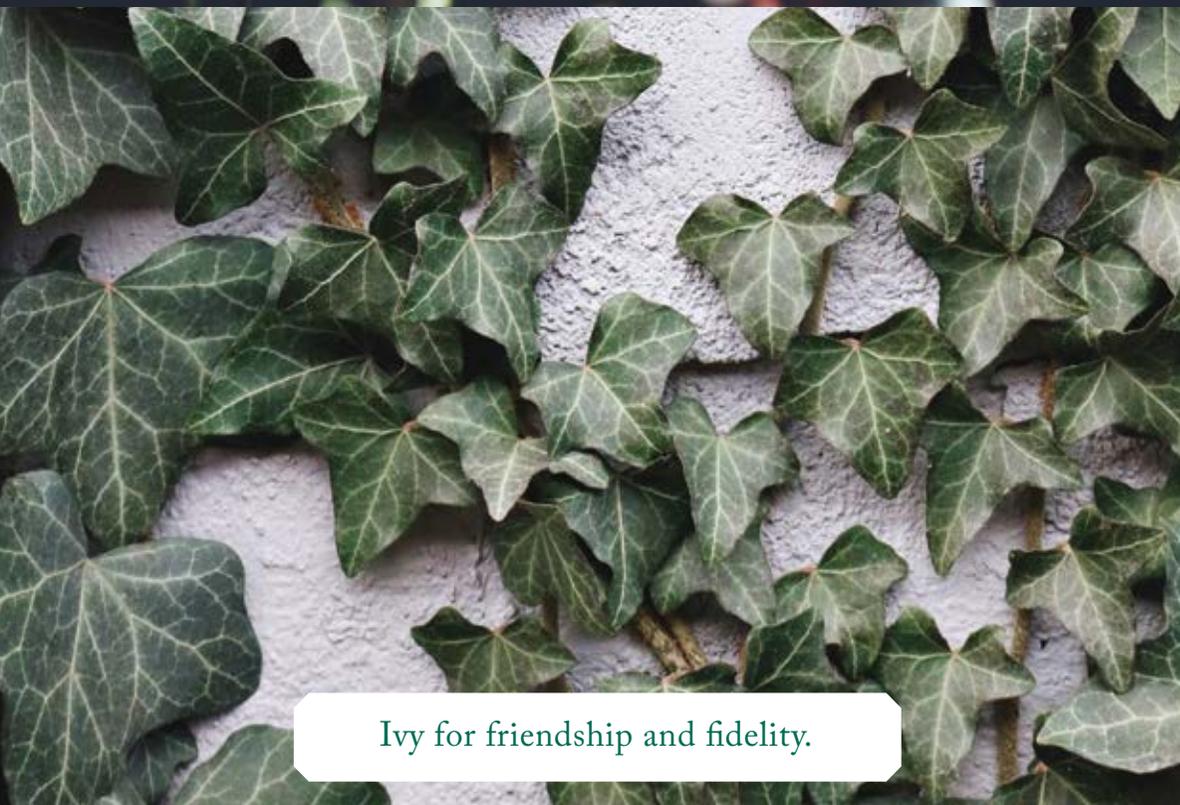
*Answer: Christmas Pud*



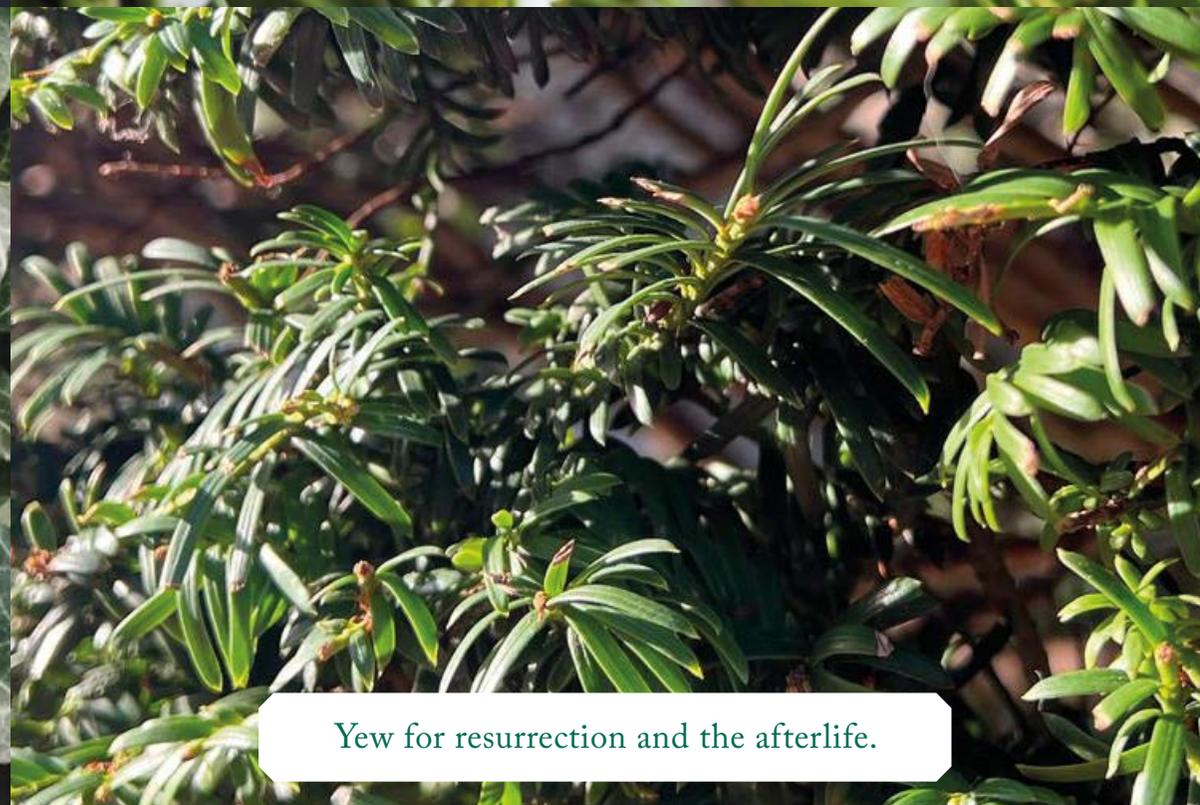
Holly for good luck and protection from lightning.



Mistletoe for prosperity and fertility.



Ivy for friendship and fidelity.



Yew for resurrection and the afterlife.

## The Legend of the Christmas Spider

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Once there was a young family, who loved Christmas as much as anyone ever did. For them it was a time of magic and mystery in the depth of winter, a bright light shining in the darkest time of year. Each year, the young children enjoyed seeing all their neighbours bringing home pine trees, to be adorned with delightful decorations and twinkling lights.

The family themselves were too poor to be able to buy a Christmas tree, but one day the children discovered a pine cone that had fallen from one of the other trees. With help from their parents, they removed a seed and planted it in a little pot. Within two or three years, the pine tree had grown big enough to take pride of place in their house at Christmas-time.

But the family were still too poor to afford any tinsel or baubles to decorate their little tree. On Christmas Eve they all went to bed excited but sad they couldn't make their little tree look more festive.

Unbeknown to them however, listening quietly in a hidden corner of the house, was a humble spider. The spider got to work. All night long she spun her silken threads – around and between the branches of the pine tree. When the children woke up on Christmas morning, sunlight was pouring through the window and the spider's webs were glistening like silver and gold on the tree; the most wonderful decorations they'd ever seen!

In Ukraine, it's still considered very good fortune to see a spider on Christmas Day, and at this time of year they make decorations that look like spiders in webs.



HIBERNATION



## Armchair Rest

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Inside caves and nests,  
minding your own business -  
that's how it was once.

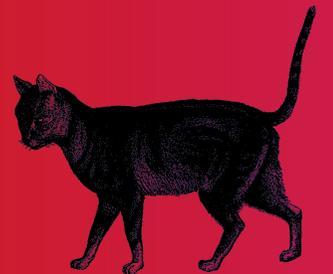
In ruined places,  
the past lives on - climbs  
knots of ivy footholds.

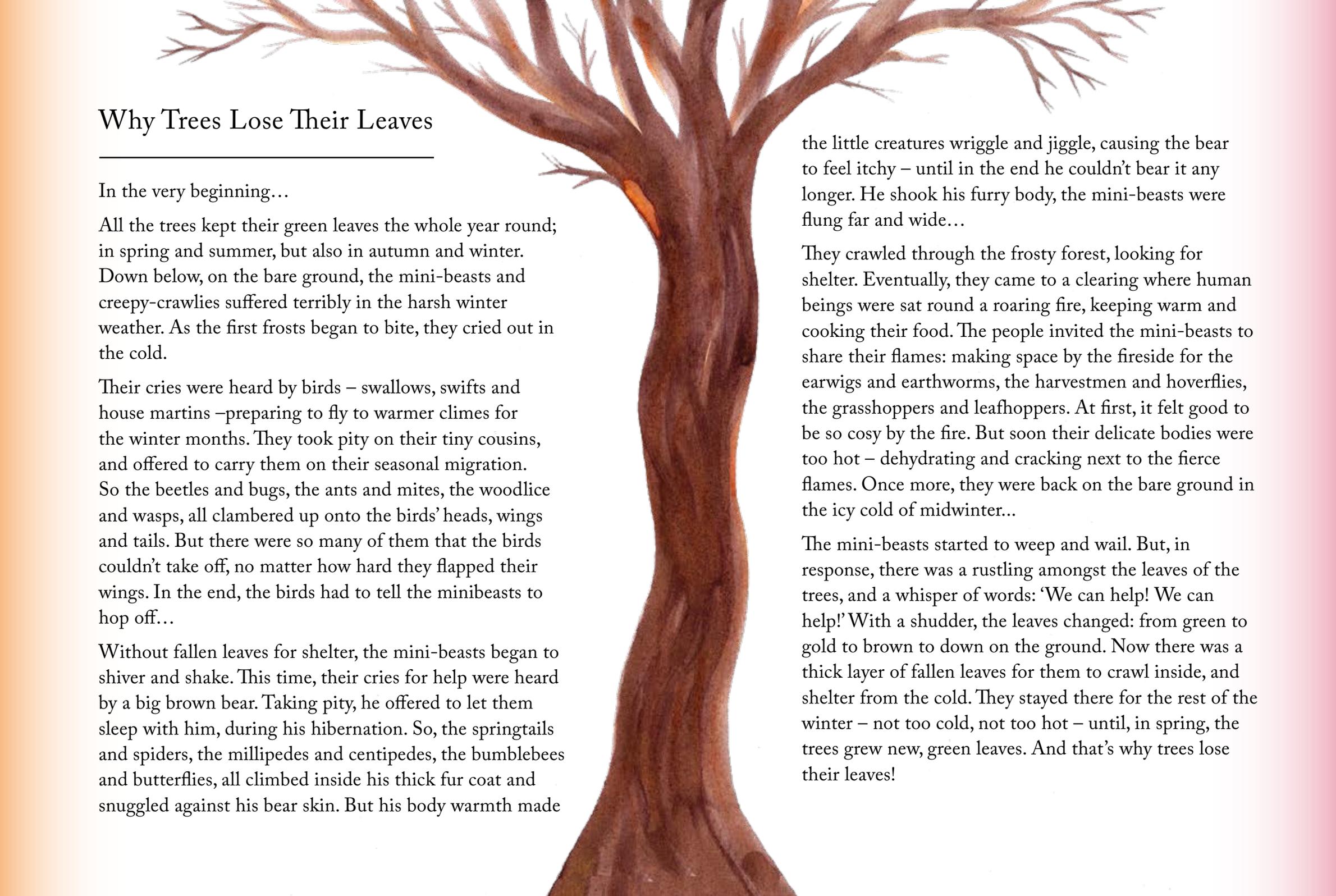
Between the years,  
patterns form. I still do everything  
I used to love as a girl.

Inside my room -  
TV and clocks  
track deep into longing.

I list the changes,  
revisit once-known places -  
an undisturbed, lost-afternoon.

“Winter is a time  
to cosy down; make  
the most of the extra  
hours of darkness,  
just being.”





## Why Trees Lose Their Leaves

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In the very beginning...

All the trees kept their green leaves the whole year round; in spring and summer, but also in autumn and winter. Down below, on the bare ground, the mini-beasts and creepy-crawlies suffered terribly in the harsh winter weather. As the first frosts began to bite, they cried out in the cold.

Their cries were heard by birds – swallows, swifts and house martins – preparing to fly to warmer climes for the winter months. They took pity on their tiny cousins, and offered to carry them on their seasonal migration. So the beetles and bugs, the ants and mites, the woodlice and wasps, all clambered up onto the birds' heads, wings and tails. But there were so many of them that the birds couldn't take off, no matter how hard they flapped their wings. In the end, the birds had to tell the minibeasts to hop off...

Without fallen leaves for shelter, the mini-beasts began to shiver and shake. This time, their cries for help were heard by a big brown bear. Taking pity, he offered to let them sleep with him, during his hibernation. So, the springtails and spiders, the millipedes and centipedes, the bumblebees and butterflies, all climbed inside his thick fur coat and snuggled against his bear skin. But his body warmth made

the little creatures wriggle and jiggle, causing the bear to feel itchy – until in the end he couldn't bear it any longer. He shook his furry body, the mini-beasts were flung far and wide...

They crawled through the frosty forest, looking for shelter. Eventually, they came to a clearing where human beings were sat round a roaring fire, keeping warm and cooking their food. The people invited the mini-beasts to share their flames: making space by the fireside for the earwigs and earthworms, the harvestmen and hoverflies, the grasshoppers and leafhoppers. At first, it felt good to be so cosy by the fire. But soon their delicate bodies were too hot – dehydrating and cracking next to the fierce flames. Once more, they were back on the bare ground in the icy cold of midwinter...

The mini-beasts started to weep and wail. But, in response, there was a rustling amongst the leaves of the trees, and a whisper of words: 'We can help! We can help!' With a shudder, the leaves changed: from green to gold to brown to down on the ground. Now there was a thick layer of fallen leaves for them to crawl inside, and shelter from the cold. They stayed there for the rest of the winter – not too cold, not too hot – until, in spring, the trees grew new, green leaves. And that's why trees lose their leaves!

# COMMUNITY



How do you get  
through winter's  
stillness?

## Good Neighbours

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Once there was a woman who lived utterly alone – far from any village or other houses. Still, she had plenty of neighbours: robins and wrens, badgers and blackbirds, foxes and hares. They provided such delightful company that she, in turn, left them fruit from her trees, seeds from her stores and scraps from her kitchen. Twice a year, a man from the nearest town made the long round trip to deliver the few essentials she needed: tea, sugar, salt and a big sack of oatmeal. Everything else she grew in her garden or foraged from the wild. A simple life, but it was enough.

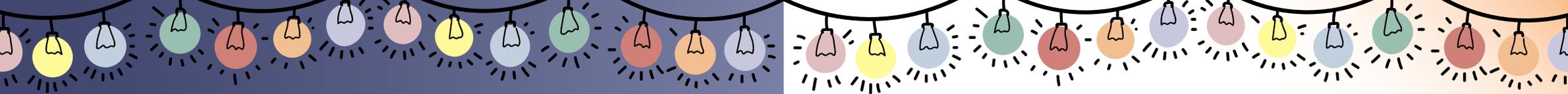
One winter, however, icy winds from the north brought a heavy snowstorm – fat flakes fell from the dark sky for night after night. The fields lay under a thick white blanket and her little cottage was completely snow-bound; the door and windows all blocked. Soon her food supplies

ran out as well, without any chance of any more deliveries getting through.

But her neighbours hadn't forgotten her. The birds brought berries and nuts which they dropped down the chimney. Fox brought offerings of fresh meat. Hare provided sticks to keep her little fire burning. Badger even rolled little balls of snow down the chimney, to melt into fresh water. And so, she survived the winter through until early spring, as the blanket of white was replaced with a carpet of green. When the delivery man eventually arrived at her house, he was surprised to find her alive and well: 'How on Earth did you survive?' he asked.

'Good neighbours!' she proudly exclaimed.





“Winter is a time  
to sparkle with  
festivity.”

## Gathering In

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The dark of the year, when winter blows,  
Old summer is past and the hours grind slow.  
A lean limp light and cold that bites,  
Survival shifts and indoors we retire.  
On a fragile loom our time is spun,  
So what if a word of complaint is uttered?  
Each morning in ritual of porridge, hot toast,  
We brace the grey day in layered wool clothes.

We dream up a feasting, a gathering of souls,  
A roomful of voices, a glowing of smiles.  
And side-by-side a listening-tribe we become,  
Flames torch the old rites and we call back the sun.  
We tell the old stories, sing season's old songs  
To keep us all going and winter-us-well.



Where do you find community?

DARKNESS



A gentle hand of wind at my back  
Pushes days along  
Pushes days along

The direction of travel  
No more battling  
No more battling

Under the stars  
Orange glow of streets  
Orange glow of streets

A distant car speeds into dark  
extended shadows long  
extended shadows long

My coat like a sail  
The world is night  
The world is night

At home slowing down  
Take your time  
Take your time

# LOOKING FORWARD

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And never brought to mind?  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And auld lang syne!

For auld lang syne, my dear,  
For auld lang syne.  
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,  
For auld lang syne.  
(Robert Burns)



Winter will ask you what  
you did over the summer

The month of January takes its name from the Roman god Janus – the gatekeeper of the year. He is often depicted with two faces: one looking backwards and one looking forwards.



Traditionally, doors of houses are opened at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve to let the Old Year out, and welcome the New Year in...



# WASSAIL

We wassail the trees, that they may bear  
Many an apple, many a pear.  
For more or less fruit they will bring,  
As we give to them in our wassailing!



## Marvellous Mulled Cider

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Pour 1 litre of cider – preferably a local, full-flavoured variety – plus 300ml of apple juice into a pan.

Add the pared zest of an orange, or two clementines, a couple of bay leaves and 2 or 3 tablespoons of brown sugar (adjust to taste).

Use a combination of the following whole spices for a festive flavour: cloves, cinnamon sticks, star anise, allspice berries or root ginger.

Bring the liquid slowly to a boil then simmer for a few minutes. Allow to cool a little before straining through a fine sieve and serving in thick glasses or mugs.

For a non-alcoholic version, replace the cider with more apple juice. For a winter beverage with extra oomph, add a glass of sloe gin or brandy to the pan just before serving. Cheers!



## The Apple Tree Man

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Once there was an old farmer with two grown sons – as different as apples and pears. The oldest was cheerful and charming, whereas his younger brother was miserable and mean. But when their father died, the youngest son inherited the farm and the eldest had to beg for a place to live. ‘You can have that old shed on the hill, and any animals left inside, as well as the old orchard. But you must pay me a rent: sixpence every year, on Twelfth Night.’

When the older brother went to the shed, he saw it was in a terrible state. Inside he discovered a donkey with a stiff leg and an ox with a bent back. Outside, the trees in the orchard were also looking worse for wear. Feeling dejected, the eldest son went wandering into the woods until he met an old woman outside her cabin. After listening to his story, she taught him how to forage for healing plants to make medicine for his sick animals. Every day, he made a poultice to go on the donkey’s leg and the back of the ox – and slowly their health returned. The older brother shovelled their manure onto the roots of the apple trees, and soon they were thriving too. By autumn, the branches were burgeoning with apples – some he ate, but most he turned into cider. The rest of the year went merrily by, until early January, when there was a sudden knock at the door.



There was his younger brother, with a reminder about the rent. The eldest son had no money to pay. ‘Well,’ said his brother. ‘I’ve heard rumours that the animals on this farm have the power of speech on Twelfth Night and might speak of buried treasure. So if you let me listen to them tonight, I’ll let you off your rent – for one year!’

The eldest son agreed, then went to the cider barrel. Sadly, there was only half a cup left. But he remembered his father’s midwinter tradition: to wish good health to the orchard. Outside, he stood in front of the oldest apple tree and poured the cider onto its roots. Suddenly, the branches turned into arms and a face appeared in the bark. There was the Apple Tree Man: ‘Thank-you! I do love a drop of my own juice... Go and dig underneath my left root, but don’t tell your brother about whatever you find...’

The older brother went inside and found a spade, then gently dug beneath the tree’s roots. Sure enough: he found a box of treasure, which he hid inside the shed. That night, the younger brother came up to listen to the animals. He heard the two creatures speaking about how good their health was and how well the orchard was doing. But they didn’t talk about buried treasure – because it wasn’t buried anymore!



## A song to start the year

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Each apple thanked -

*Another song from us!*

Each tree blessed -

*Another song from us!*

Better a prayer than a wish,

Better a blessing than a request,

Better a thanks than a thirst,

Better a warmth than a loss,

Better a rest than a rot,

Better a shadow than a drought,

Better a fire than a harm,

Better a sleep than a starve,

Better seasons and trust.

A drink to your health -

*Another song from us!*



## What does winter mean to you?

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“...bird song changes, dusk brings in the chill.”

“the season for hibernating and hunkering down by a fire, and for indoor feasting with family and friends.”

“Winter is... cold, mud, windy, bare trees, ice, feeding birds.”

“A time to retreat, regenerate and renew.”

“Walking on those crisp sunny days with sharp winter light, sunsets, the moon and stars.”

“I look forward to the shortest day as I know the days are getting longer from then on in.”

“Frosty mornings followed by a cold crisp sunny day and a walk at the local nature reserve. Bird watching for all the winter visitors.”

“Snow makes everything look pristine and I can build snowmen with my kids, even if they are in their 40s!”

“I feel cosy and safe in winter because it’s okay to hide indoors.”

“I struggle a bit with the cold and dark, but welcome the fun and sparkle of Christmas.”

“The opportunity for time inside in front of a cosy fire, especially after a good walk in nature and dose of fresh air.”

“Lighting our candles at all the different festivals of Light, including Diwali.”

“Winter veg from the allotment - kale, brussels sprouts, purple sprouting.”

“Empty beaches and windy-wild cliff top walks. Loneliness becomes solitude.”

“The nights are longer and the temperature has dropped.”

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With thanks for your thoughts and contributions.

## A Blessing

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Warm words on a cold evening,  
A full moon on a dark night,  
A steady heartbeat in the stillness  
And an easy road all the way to your door...

*For your winter notes*

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes, alternating in color between light blue, light green, light yellow, and light pink.









Some helpful information  
about this book and the  
Stepping into Nature project.

[www.stepin2nature.org](http://www.stepin2nature.org)

We decided against a 'how to' use this book. It is a book like any other, for individuals and groups of all ages. We want to celebrate winter and share our favourite stories and themes. Our intention is to offer conversation starters and to stimulate thoughts, songs, stories...plus ideas, memories and joy.

Feel free to write your own seasonal reflections in the blank pages here.

Martin and Sarah have worked with the Stepping into Nature team and wider community to co-create the themes in this book and shape them. If you are using this book as a group facilitator or with a family member, you may develop your own personal question prompts inspired by winter.

Fair winds and blessings,

*Sarah and Martin*

## Poems you may like to look up for Winter:

Love after Love  
by Derek Walcott

Snow  
by Gillian Clarke

In the Bleak Mid-winter  
by Christina Rossetti

Spellbound  
by Emily Bronte

Talking Turkeys  
by Benjamin Zephaniah

Stopping by woods on a snowy evening  
by Robert Frost

Birds at Winter Nightfall/The Darkling Thrush  
by Thomas Hardy

December began with shopping  
by L Kiew

Fiere  
by Jackie Kay

## About Martin

Martin Maudsley is a writer and storyteller based in Bridport, with a particular passion for telling tales about the natural world, the changing seasons and local heritage. Over the last few years, he has devised and delivered several projects for the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty that engage people with place through story – ‘re-storying the landscape’.

Despite the wild weather, winter holds many bright treasures. The dark, cold nights provide the perfect setting for sitting round the fire together and telling stirring stories. In January, Martin can be found outdoors amongst the apple trees leading proceedings at several orchard wassails, including for Dorset Nectar Cider and the Ethicurean restaurant in Somerset. He also plays and sings with a local folk group called The Woodlanders.

His first book, *Telling the Seasons*, was published by The History Press in 2022 – a storyteller’s journey through the twelve months of the year with stories, customs and celebrations.

Waes hael!



## About Sarah

Sarah Acton is a poet, oral history writer and community theatre-maker. Sarah co-creates arts commissions and community outreach projects for organisations, museums and community groups with a focus on creative connection to nature, seasons and place.

Sarah’s writing is inspired by local landscapes and time outdoors, themes of belonging and how we shape narratives through memory, and a passion for folk culture, the living voice - rhythms and dialect. Wild Writing is part of Sarah’s wellbeing, teaching, and creative practice. Sarah looks forward to winter-bright fires at home catching up with reading, crisp walks along the Fleet and coastal path, learning about birds and moth migrations, and dreaming into big skies sparkling with winter constellations. She rows and swims...only sometimes over winter!

Sarah is the writer of the Heart of Stone community play project on Portland, and her oral history book, *Seining Along Chesil Beach* is available through Little Toller Books.



This book is part of the Stepping into Nature project and made in partnership with Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

## About Stepping into Nature

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Being close to nature can help boost your health, mood and build self-esteem. In short, it can make you feel better and put a smile on your face too!

Stepping into Nature works with local organisations to provide inclusive activities that help older people, people living with long-term health conditions including dementia, and their care partners to enjoy the benefits of nature.

Through the activities, people can discover new places, learn new skills and meet others. The project also funds communities and organisations to help create more inclusive, accessible and enjoyable green spaces, and train staff and volunteers to become dementia friendly.

For more information visit

[www.stepin2nature.org](http://www.stepin2nature.org)



Compiled by the Stepping into Nature Team.

With stories written by storyteller, Martin Maudsley, and original poems written by poet, Sarah Acton.

All anonymous sayings, riddles and old folklore sourced are referenced as ('Traditional').

Participant quotes and voices are from the wider Stepping into Nature community.

Commissioned by Jules Hammon.  
Design by Spike Golding.  
Additional content from  
Stephanie Aburrow & Jules Hammon.

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