

## Wolf Month

*Mary O'Donnell*

One January, the whole country turned to photography. Those without power-cuts or burst pipes, chilled white wine in the snow on New Year's Day. All the way to the Dublin mountains, a virginal day dressed in pure white, and the silence that accompanied it, were mystical.

The month was named after Janus, the ancient Roman deity, guardian of doorways, gates, and beginnings, and protector of the state in time of war. Janus looks both backwards and forwards: backwards to a world lying fallow and reflecting on past events, forward to spring and new growth. It is my favourite month—with the chance of storm and rain, or quiet and pearl-grey skies, the earth trickling and moist, only robins, sparrows and the eternal crows of north Kildare as companions during the day.

Later in history, the Anglo-Saxons called it Wolf Month because wolves entered the villages in winter, searching for food. I name it Peace Month, because Christmas is over, and for the first weeks of each new year, the atmosphere on the roads is calm. There is nothing more to spend on, decorate, or post out.

In this coldest month, hibernating animals still sleep. Plants are resting. Only the Snowdrop—that most virginal of plants—pushes thrilling, modest little heads through the chill soil, the centre of each plant sparked with tiny threads of yellow. If the winter has been mild, daffodils and outdoor hyacinths will nudge up in lusty spikes—a hint, like the “fragrance” of the first line of a Haiku poem, of what's to come. Yet they never unsheathe themselves until temperatures are optimal and the regal yellows and purples of March are underway.

My cousin the painter shares my enthusiasm for January. There is nothing left to celebrate, she remarked, nothing to feel you must be jolly about when you're not in the mood, nothing that involves extra work. There is, simply, a quiet ease that fills her with the hope for new canvasses, but none of the pressure of enforced commerciality.

The fuss is over. Families that came together have dispersed again and each nucleus is left to its own devices to reflect brightly, or with

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melancholy, on what may have occurred over the recent season. Perhaps not to reflect, but to move in a different current that has little to do with social diktats.

January mirrors the aspect of the human personality that is inward-turning, which does not test itself against the external. There is the possibility of oneness but also of detachment from tribal celebration, remembering that the wheel of life and fortune also offers the solace of rest—all the better for growth. If I want to celebrate, there's always Little Christmas, or Women's Christmas, a scaled-down gathering, inclusive of women. It also coincides with the Christian Epiphany which marks the visit of the Magi to the child Jesus, but on a secular level, signals, for some, a realisation of great truth. It is probably no coincidence that the Hindu term Darsana is also connected to "epiphany," or visions of the divine.

It is not just a time. It hovers beyond the temporal. The sun has passed through the winter solstice and earth has begun its upwards tilt to light. The spectrum is pure. Whatever is in shade seems darker; what is in light, flares with colour. The branches of the birch are like the hull of a boat, strong, curving broadly, the bark mottled with ochre, grey and brown; the oak is sturdy, branches still decked with Christmas lights that flicker softly in the breeze at night. These trees are enshrouded in silence. They have nothing to say, beyond *endure, endure*.

Never look back for long. Memory is too tricky a guide to be completely reliable. The purpose of the past is to urge us forward a little. Come New Year's Day, I plan and project, looking forward. But for those few weeks, I don't want to do very much about the plans. This is the time of year I live truly in the present, in days—for where else, to paraphrase Philip Larkin, is there to live?—living within the short cycle of light, and the alchemy of sloe gins in the evening. Each day, every hour, a minute, a second inscribes itself on me—yes, Time's emissary is calling; but I too inscribe something in return: the sense of myself passing through, the sense of my labours in time, in a specific place in this chill, Northern hemisphere, and the clarity that this sometimes brings.

*(January 2012)*