

February

Only a week later, winter rushed in from the east and snow came down, creating shelves of ice that arced out of the bays of the mere. The water couldn't defy the cold so the ice grew hard and dense in its veins, then froze rapidly as it splashed on the stems of the reeds and low twigs of osier trees. This created tiny ice sculptures, pieces of glass, all solidified at the same height so they seemed to float in the air. I watched several drops form then hang for a while as they froze. The powdery snow failed to settle and was dragged by the wind to form scour lines that separated as they turned through the low cut reeds and clumps of brittle sedge that rose from black holes in the ice. The shallow water had frozen in a thin grey sheet but, around this, you could see the ice form in infinite ways, it seemed. Sometimes bubbles are caught in the shoals, other times water cracks when this turns to ice. The needles get trapped. Sometimes it is forms out of the snow that melts then turns to new grown ice. Sometimes pockets of air are caught in a thin crust that cracks easily beneath your feet, exposing deeper snow from the start of the snowstorm. Further on I saw beds of pond weed captured in ice as clear as glass but where they rose, they made fossils of white frost. Sometimes liquid was forced from the peat; black blood emerging to leave dark stains on the snow. Nature was locked down for those few bleak days everything scoured and bare - the expanse of the mere now free of birds. Apart from the sound of the wind – the marsh was dead and silenced. Everything had shrunk down to one cold, hard thought - the desperate need to get through these bad times. If conditions stayed like this for long, any out of sight place, where life retreats, would be a new grave and the marsh would grow one more layer of bones.

The cold formed spears of pain through my temples and my hands and feet were numb. On the way back, I saw thousands of widgeon and teal, squeezed in a small wide lode - so many there was no room left, as if they hoped to defend this one last piece of warmth.