THE WAY BACK ALMANAC 2023



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Sharing Wisdom Since 1893

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THE WAY BACK ALMANAC 2023

A Contemporary Seasonal Guide Back to Nature

MELINDA SALISBURY

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This edition first published in the UK and USA in 2022
by Watkins, an imprint of Watkins Media Limited
Unit 11, Shepperton House
89–93 Shepperton Road
London
N1 3DF

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Illustrations by Ella Tjader

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed and typeset by Watkins

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ Books Ltd

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78678-495-7 (Hardback)

www.watkinspublishing.com



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Introduction

If this is your first time reading *The Way Back Almanac*, hello and welcome! I'm so happy you picked up this book, and I hope it helps you to forge or grow your relationship with nature and the natural world throughout 2023. And if you read the first one, then welcome back! Thank you so much for wanting to continue this journey with me; I'm honoured.

If you haven't read the first almanac, let me just give you a little bit of background about me, and how I came to write these books.

Around 2016, I realized that my love of spending time outside and my curiosity about nature were no longer part of

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my identity. I think this happens to most of us – the old adage about putting aside childish things springs to mind – we throw ourselves into adulthood and all the commitments and responsibilities that come with it, and in the process we lose sight of the things that used to bring us joy. So for me, nature had become something to be watched on television, or to sign petitions about, distant and foreign from my everyday life. It wasn't something I actively did anymore, and recognizing that saddened me, especially when sharpened by the understanding that climate disaster, and the lack of meaningful action to address it, meant nature was being altered, threatened and damaged every single day.

At the time I rented a room in a shared house, in a commuter town; I had no use of a garden, no easy access to the countryside being a non-driver. But there was access to the seaside, at the mouth of the Thames Estuary, and so I made that my starting point. I took daily walks, around sunset, listening to birds and looking for crabs and shells, puzzling out what lived in the natural world on my doorstep. I used the Internet to see what parks and walks were nearby and made an effort to visit them, again looking at the magpies and blackbirds and robins that lived there, pausing to watch brown rats sneaking through the undergrowth by fishing ponds. I started to remember all the things I used to know, and as the knowledge returned so did the hunger for more. Formerly as black-thumbed as could be, I started growing houseplants, moving on to windowsill tomatoes and chillies as my confidence and aptitude grew. I went on longer walks and used public transport to get to woods and nature reserves,

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spending the day there, immersing myself in the outdoors. As my connection grew, I decided I wanted to do more to help, so I examined my diet and habits and made what alterations I could to live more sustainably: locally sourced food, seasonal fruit and vegetables, less plastic, less waste, fewer harmful ingredients, secondhand, self-mended and homemade clothes.

Then came the idea for the first of these books. To write a modern kind of almanac, for people who wanted to connect, or reconnect, with nature but still live 21st-century lives. A book which takes into account that these days so many people by necessity live in cities, share rented homes with family, friends and strangers, or face physical or economic obstacles that can make engaging with nature difficult. A book that explores the folklore and mythology of the past, and looks to the stars and the changing of the seasons, but that also acknowledges realistic and practical things normal people can do in their everyday lives to bring a little of the outdoors into their homes and worlds. The first book came out in 2021, launching just as the UK began to emerge from the restrictions put in place to manage Covid-19. I think the (necessary) confinement we were subjected to during that time made many of us itch to get outside and appreciate nature even more, to truly understand that perhaps it wouldn't always be there and available to us and that we shouldn't take it for granted.

The almanac is divided into the twelve months of the year, and then further subsections within each month.

Each month starts with a note: a little about the usual weather, the mood of the month as I see it, the things you might

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see if you go outside, or watch on webcams. Then the skies at night: the phases of the moon, meteor showers, and which constellations are "in season" that month. The next section talks gardening; even if all you have is one windowsill, it will take you month by month through what you can do, and what to expect. There's a section about which fruits and vegetables are in season, and it includes a recipe designed to complement them. All of the recipes are vegan, but feel free to substitute dairy ingredients if you wish, or add meat or fish. A lot of the recipes have also been created to make just one or two portions, because there's nothing more annoying than finding a great recipe only to realize it's intended to feed a family, or to make multiple portions to be stored in freezer or fridge space that a lot of us are lacking.

There are more modern parts too: one regarding the home, and how you can create items for your space to maintain a connection with nature for the days and weeks when you can't go outside. Another focuses on the mobile phone, and how you can use your phone to learn and record your journey. Then there are the indulgences, treats you can make for yourself every month using ingredients that can be grown or foraged, or that are better for the environment (and most likely you too!).

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There's a book club section, where each month I recommend a fiction or non-fiction title that makes me think about nature in some way; maybe literally, maybe just more about the story of change and growth. If you want to talk about the books, or meet your fellow Way Backers, I'll be using the hashtag #WayBackBookClub on Twitter and Instagram to talk about them throughout the relevant month, so feel free to join in or start your own strands of thought.



My favourite part is the Voices section, which includes some of my most loved folklore, superstitions and mythology from around the world, and also an interview with someone in the present who has forged, or is forging, a connection with nature, whether through professional practice, hobby or lifestyle.

Finally, there is a journal section, "In your hands", for you. So you can record your thoughts, feelings and adventures each month, adding drawings or photos if you're so inclined. It's up to you how you read and use this almanac, but I'd recommend taking it month by month, setting aside an hour or two on the first day of the month to read through and start making plans.

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One final thing to note is that I am British. As you read through, you'll notice that in addition to discussing the natural world in the UK, I also talk a little about nature in the US, and I think it's important for me to make it clear that I don't live in the US, and never have. Everything you read about nature in the UK is my lived experience; it's drawn from years of amateur study and exploration, so it comes from a place of authenticity in that respect. But to write the parts that relate to the fauna and flora of the US, I've had to rely solely on online and book research, and the help of a US biologist. I've done my best to try to get it right, but the US is so vast and ecosystems, climates, habitats, plants and flowers vary so much from state to state – and sometimes even within states – that it's inevitable I've missed things that to US readers might seem obvious, or commonplace, and for that I'm sorry.

All that remains is to wish you good luck. We're going to have a great year, and by the end of it we're going to have a stronger relationship with the outdoors. Are you ready? Let's go!

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January

Regarding January

We are at the top of another year, staring down the proverbial barrel at an unknown future. Who knows what possibilities will come our way in 2023? Who can tell what dreams will come true, which doors will open, how many paths will cross ours and make our lives richer and brighter? At this precise point in time, the universe is wide open to us and the pages of the next chapter of our lives are yet to be written. It makes me feel fizzy with excitement, New Year's champagne bubbles in my veins.

I don't think I'm alone in saying that I love the sense of second chance that the change of the year offers. To be able to wipe the slate clean of the things that didn't serve you and begin afresh, taking everything you've learned and experienced and fought for in the last year (and all those before) forward with you as you start a whole new era of your life.

But if you read the first edition of *The Way Back Almanac*, then you know that it's my personal belief that January, with its often-overwhelming coldness and darkness, and the sense of flagging and fatigue sometimes lingering after the holidays have passed, is perhaps not the best time to fling yourself wholeheartedly into a new state of being.

Despite that, this is the time of year when multiple industries will want you to believe that everything you already are is not

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good enough. They seem to think that the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve demands you become something else; weight is usually mentioned, as are finances. Rather than using the changing of the year to look back with pride at everything we achieved – and maybe even survived – the previous year, we're told it wasn't good enough and we have to go again.

Friends, I wholeheartedly reject this and I encourage you to, too. There is a time and a place for vigorous self-interrogation and making leaps towards improvement, but the deep of winter, after the stresses and delights of the holiday season, is not it. If everything else in nature is focused on hunkering down and living off the reserves gathered in sunnier times, then maybe we should be too.

So this January, embrace the darkness and the cold. Repurpose them as guardians and caretakers, gently urging you to be cautious. Try to reframe how you think of them; yes, the nights draw in fast and make it harder to be outside, but could that be an opportunity to make the most of your life inside? Perhaps inclement weather and a lack of sunshine is nature asking you to take it slow, to be mindful of the limitations of the seasons and to bend yourself towards them, rather than trying to align them (and yourself!) to your will. Aligning yourself with the natural rhythms of the outside world might make them a little easier to bear. Never mind faddy diets that seek only to make you spend money on feeling terrible about yourself. Instead make hearty, rich food that will fill and warm and nourish you through the ice-bitten days. Instead of beginning some kind of extreme exercise regime to punish yourself for

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who you've been until now, build yourself a little nest to retreat to when frigid rains batter at the windows.

A balanced, healthy diet is important for your wellbeing, and so is regular moderate exercise. But self-loathing isn't, and any regimen that demands you starve or bully yourself will not help you in the end.

Nature might.

There have been numerous studies that show spending time outdoors is good for mental health, and we all know walking is the best possible exercise. And there will be at least one day in January, maybe more, when the rain holds off and the sun makes a gauzy but valiant attempt to break through the layers of grey cloud. Keep an eye out for that day, and when it comes, make the most of it.

But while you do, I want you to think about ice. Glittering and clear, treacherous underfoot. On icy ground each step must be considered, your centre of gravity constantly shifting, body moving to accommodate the danger.

I want you to keep this feeling in mind as you make your first steps into the world. Be mindful of the ice underfoot, both real and imagined – there are lots of things in January that want to see you trip up and burn through your remaining reserves of energy, lots of things that insist they need your immediate time and attention, and ask you to give yourself away without considering that you might need to regroup. So bear the ice in mind. Make sure each step you take this month is deliberate and considered, and that your feet are steady as you walk, your weight shifting to keep your balance. Look at the nature you see

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(or don't see, even) as you walk around, such as the few hardy birds who know to conserve their strength, to only venture out of the warmth of the nest when the conditions are favourable.

The patterns ice makes can be very beautiful, and the crystalline sense it leaves on the air is invigorating, so make sure to appreciate it, but be cautious. It can be slippery. Take your lead from the wild creatures around you.

To get a better idea of what they're up to, check out some webcams. For UK wildlife and nature, try the Countryfile webcams list: www.countryfile.com/wildlife/wildlife-webcams-uk-ireland/, which includes land animals, birds, and even seals; the Wildlife Trusts webcams list: www.wildlifetrusts.org/webcams; or try www.discoverwildlife.com, which hosts a plethora of wildlife cams.

For readers in the US, or those who want to look at nature in the States, try searching for national park webcams. The Katmai National Park brown bear cam is famously brilliant, especially over summer when the bears are hunting salmon; it's home of the Fat Bear Week, the tongue-in-cheek online contest that "pits" the bears against each other to see which has put on the most weight for winter. There's also the red-tailed hawk camera in Ithaca, New York, hosted by Cornell Labs (www.allaboutbirds.org/cams/red-tailed-hawks) and the golden eagle cam (www.goldeneaglecam.org) based in Oregon. You could also search through the cams featured on www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/webcams.htm for more.

Have a gentle January. There's still plenty of year left.

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In the skies

2023 is set to see thirteen full moons, though the Blue Moon does not occur until August, so let's put that aside for now and focus on what's before us.

Our first celestial event of new year is the **Quadrantids meteor shower on the 4th.** Unfortunately, the approaching full moon means visibility will be poor, as the moon won't set until a couple of hours before dawn, making the likelihood of seeing much, or really any, of the shower slim. But not to worry; there will be others later in the year, so for now you can feel justified in staying curled up somewhere cosy indoors – you're not missing anything.

We begin the year under a waxing gibbous moon and I like that we begin the year in a period of lunar growth. During 2021 I experimented with loosely structuring my life in accordance with the moon phases (where practical, as with everything). It's something I go into in more detail in "In the soil" from February, as I used it mostly to inform my gardening habits, but I also liked the idea of setting goals and tasks according to the phases of the moon. If you're interested in doing the same, the template I followed was thus:

Waxing moon (moon becoming fuller): Being proactive and ambitious with accomplishing things, or reaching for them. A time for being a little bolder, a little braver, and pushing myself out of my comfort zone. A good time to be generous and expansive, and for saying yes.

Full moon: An introspective and fulfilling opportunity to reflect on what I began building as the moon waxed, but also a chance to explore anything that might be holding me back, or blocking me.

Waning moon (moon becoming slimmer): Cleaning, tidying up loose ends, finishing or finalizing anything outstanding, saying goodbye to anything which no longer served me or was needed.

New moon: Another introspective time, where I focused on what I wanted to achieve in the coming four weeks, and set my intentions and goals and hopes for the near future. If you're into manifesting, this is the time!

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For all "In the skies" sections I have given the exact GMT times of each celestial event. These can be adjusted by adding or subtracting the number of hours difference in your part of the world (including local summer time changes). This could move the event forwards or backwards one day. Through the night-time is usual to view planets, except Mercury, which may be visible just before dawn (Western Elongation) or just after sunset (Eastern Elongation). Note: These elongations are measured east and west of the Sun, and so the reverse of the direction you are looking!

It may seem a little airy-fairy, but I personally enjoyed the way it became a touchstone, checking in with the sky, and with myself, every week – if nothing else, it gave me a better understanding of the ebbing and flowing of my own energy and motivation. And it's also a wickedly mysterious excuse to get out of things you're not invested in: "I'm sorry, I can't, the moon is waning."

January's full moon comes on the 6th, and is known by various names: **Wolf Moon; Ice Moon; Old Moon; the Moon After Yule.** The most commonly used Moon names – and the ones this almanac will use – originated with the Algonquin tribes and they traditionally applied the name to the entire lunar cycle, not just the full moon. The names were chosen in reference to a common occurrence or event that happened during that cycle. The Wolf Moon was so named because it was the month during which wolves would howl with hunger.

The new moon happens on January 21st, and we close the month with it waxing once more.

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In the soil

If you read the 2022 *Way Back Almanac*, you'll be familiar with this section already. Gardening, like all of nature, follows the same kinds of cycles each year, which is something I find incredibly reassuring – we can repeat the same patterns and actions year on year, we can tune into the seasons, learn from them, and live in harmony with them. It's a lovely thing.

For those of you who are reading *The Way Back Almanac* for the first time, this section is designed to help you grow things in pots, on windowsills, inside. It doesn't ask you to have a garden, or a hydroponic set up, or be an expert in pollination, and it's not about yielding a bountiful harvest to feed you through the year. It's about nurturing something from seed to plate, as much about observing the natural cycle as it is benefitting from it. But nature does love efficiency, so why not benefit from eating freshly grown produce at the same time?

So, readers old and new, your task this month is to think carefully about what you'd like to grow this coming year. I've grown cherry tomatoes, chillies, banana peppers, radishes, baby carrots, spring onions (scallions), salad leaves (greens), microgreens, dwarf beans and peas, basil, chives and rosemary successfully in pots, on the windowsills of my flat – in fact in 2022 I grew peas and radishes from seeds that I had harvested from my own windowsill peas and radishes!

When choosing what you want to grow, think about how much space you have, and think about the flavours you love and eat often. Visualize yourself caring for the plants, harvesting

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them and using them in your cooking. Take a trip to the library for a dose of old-fashioned research, or stay tucked up at home and use the Internet to explore the kinds of things you'd like to grow and do some leisurely research into varieties; some of my favourites include Tiny Tims and Sugardrop (tomatoes), Tom Thumb dwarf peas, Little Gem lettuces (you might be noticing a theme!) and radishes (avoid larger ones like daikon, but regular radish seeds are good!). Carrots are very accommodating vegetables too, and will cheerfully grow in pots; look for smaller varieties like Baby Chantenays, Parisian Heirloom and Little Fingers. Microgreens are the edible green foliage that grows above ground from root vegetables like carrots, beets, radishes and brassicas like cauliflower and cabbage, harvested less than a month after germination, when around 5cm (2in) tall. You can buy specific microgreen seed packets, or just harvest the early shoots from the seeds mentioned above, when they look a little like cress. In fact, you can

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grow them as easily as cress too, on trays with just a little soil, in a sprouting jar or even damp kitchen roll, and you can grow them all year round.

If you live in a shared space you don't own, you'll need to talk to the other people who live in your home about whether you can use communal window space or balconies to grow things. Start by figuring out which direction your windows face, and which rooms get the best/most light for what you plan to sow. Tomatoes and herbs like a lot of sun, so a south/southwest-facing window will please them (they will need protecting from bright sunlight when they're little, but small greenhouses or cloches (transparent plastic or glass domes) for individual pots are readily and cheaply available online or in shops such as Flying Tiger, Wilko, Target, Dollar Tree, etc.) Peas and beans can get tall and will need staking, so vertical space is important if you want to grow those. Lettuces and spinach are best grown in troughs as they need wide, long spaces, although I have had success growing spinach in individual 20cm pots – lettuce and spinach grow fast and root shallow, which is good news for the container gardener!

For now, your job is research and planning, cajoling your housemates into letting you occupy the windows, thinking about the kinds of containers you'll need for the space you have, and whether that's inside or outside, and, when you're ready, ordering or buying the seeds you want to grow. Please don't feel under any pressure to grow masses – if you just want to grow one basil plant, that's fine too. Choose what you think you'll be able to give the most attention to.

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One note: if possible, please try to buy organic or heirloom seeds from small, self-sustaining companies or cooperatives, or try to join a local seed-swapping library or cooperative. Two-thirds of the global seed supply is held by a handful of conglomerates – which means they have control over a huge swathe of the global food supply – and they use their power and leverage to dictate to farmers and growers what they can and can't grow, and when; whether they can harvest their own seeds to grow the following year; and even the kinds of fertilizer they can use (ones manufactured by a company the conglomerate owns, of course). Not only this, but hundreds of varieties of seeds and ancient grains have been lost because these monoliths favour standardized varieties over locally adapted crops, limiting the kinds of foods people can grow around the world and putting the global food supply at risk. So try to keep it as local and organic as you can.

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NOTES...

In season

Despite the fact it's winter, there is a huge amount of fresh fruit and vegetables seasonally available. We tend to think of summer and early autumn as the seasons where harvests are the most bountiful, but good, fresh produce is available for most of the year – there are only a couple of months in late spring when the pickings are naturally slimmer.

Beetroot (beets), Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, celeriac, chicory (Belgian endive), Jerusalem artichokes, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, parsnips, potatoes, salsify, shallots, swede (rutabaga) and turnips are all in season through January.

Fruit-wise you should easily be able to find **apples, rhubarb, blood oranges, clementines, kiwi fruit, lemons, oranges, passion fruit, pears, pineapples, pomegranates, satsumas and tangerines.**

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Cauliflower and chestnut soup

Serves 2–3

I have always wanted to be the kind of person who constantly has a vat of soup on the stove, ready for an influx of visitors bustling in from the cold, and this soup is perfect for that. I first came across a version of it after buying some vacuum-packed chestnuts, intending to roast them with Brussels sprouts only to never get around to it. As the use-by date approached, I did a quick online search, and came across chestnut and cauliflower soup. A few tweaks later, I had a nutty, creamy and filling soup ready for the hoards to descend, or to feed me for a few days. It's a win–win scenario. The recipe is vegan, but please feel free to use dairy/animal ingredients in place if so desired. Serves 2–3 generous portions.

Ingredients

1 medium/large head of cauliflower, cut into florets

200g/7oz vacuum-packed chestnuts

1 medium-sized onion, chopped finely

1 clove garlic, minced

750ml–1l/26–35fl oz/3¼–4⅓ cups of vegetable stock

250ml/9fl oz/1 cup dairy-free milk (soya or pea is best as they have a less distinct flavour, in my opinion)

100ml/3½fl oz non-dairy thick cream

1 tbsp olive oil

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1 tbsp lemon juice

1 tsp Dijon mustard (you could swap this for horseradish if you prefer the flavour and want a cooler heat; both work really well)

1 bay leaf

Salt and pepper to taste

Method

1. In a large pan, heat the olive oil, then fry the onion on a medium heat until soft. Add the garlic and gently fry for around 30 seconds (do not let it brown). Then add the cauliflower florets, bay leaf, 750ml of the stock, and the milk. Bring to a simmer, and then turn the heat down. Cover and leave to cook for 10–12 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, roughly chop the chestnuts.
3. Once 10–12 minutes has passed, uncover the pan and add the chestnuts, lemon juice, mustard, salt and pepper and the cream, and bring back to the boil.
4. Once it has started boiling, turn off the heat, fish out the bay leaf, then use a blender or hand-held (immersion) blender to blend the soup to a smooth liquid. Add the remaining stock until you reach your preferred consistency for your soup, and add more salt and pepper if desired.

Serve with fresh bread (garlic bread is LOVELY with this!).

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In the home

You'll know by now that being productive in January is anathema to me. It makes utterly zero sense to come out of the other side of the often-stressful festive season and immediately take an audit of yourself, come to the conclusion you're inadequate in some way, and then try to change it. The idea of a fresh start is so appealing, but not right now. Right now, we are in the deepest, darkest depths of winter and there's still a lot more to come, so we are going to do the sensible thing and go to ground. We're going to build a nest to hibernate in during the cold and dark.

For those of you new to this, your nest should be somewhere quiet, where you can be comfortably alone to read, write in your diary, nap, cry, chat on the phone, meditate – a place that's able to accommodate your chosen method of downtime. It doesn't need to be a huge space – a corner of your sofa or bed, or the inside of a wardrobe, is just fine; what's important is that it's yours and it's somewhere you can retreat to when life feels a bit too much.

Your nest will also need furnishing! Overleaf are some of the things I recommend considering. If you are a previous reader and have an established nest, maybe you could take this chance to swap out some of the old bedding, like a badger, and bring in new things: new textures, flavours and smells. Consider how much you've changed in the last year and whether the things that used to serve you still do. If they do, all the better. But if not, why not gently explore some alternatives?

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- Something to keep you warm. Either a blanket or a throw, or a long, thick cardigan. Maybe some socks too? Items you can use to cocoon yourself, and stay cosy.

- Something to light the space. Candles are great, if you're permitted to have them (though stay clear of paraffin ones unless your nest is well ventilated). A Himalayan salt lamp (not safe if you have pets) or LED string lights are nice. Nothing harsh or too bright; the idea is to keep it relaxing.

- Something that smells good. If you're using candles, why not use scented ones? Otherwise, consider incense, an oil burner or even a few squirts of your favourite perfume.

- Something to nourish you. Teas, hot chocolate, hot apple cider, pumpkin cookies, buttered toast – think of something light but comforting you can enjoy in your nest (if toast and cookies, it's my duty to warn you about crumb potential in the blankets. I learned the hard way…).

- Something to listen to. Your favourite songs, a meditation track, ASMR tracks, white noise, the sound of the sea or rain – take some time to explore which sounds help you to relax and make a playlist you can put on in the background.

You now should have created a small slice of peace, a place where you can replenish yourself. In an increasingly confusing and changing world, you have a port in a storm. You deserve it.

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In your phone



It's an inescapable fact that for most of us, a mobile phone is essential to keep our lives running smoothly. It's been a long time since a phone was simply a portable way to keep in touch; these days they contain our diaries and schedules, access to our money, our work and social lives, our memories, our hobbies, our medical records. So I'm not going to pretend or encourage you to put your phone away in a drawer and live a life unfettered by one (except once, later in the year, and just for an hour or two). Rather, we're going to look at how we can take advantage of the technology available to us to grow and enhance our relationship with the outside world.

What I'd like to begin the year with is the makings of a photo journal. One of the books recommended in this almanac (February) explores the micro seasons of the UK and just how much change happens during the year, even in our local neighborhoods, and I think

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engaging with that is something we can all benefit from.

So, during your first journey into the outside world this year I want you to choose a patch of it. It could be a tree, or a pond, a section of wall or an area of pavement. It could even be a scrubby bit of verge you're convinced the local council has forgotten. Whatever it is, stake a (mental) claim on it, and then take a photo of it. Examine it, try to identify any plants or insects. Look them up, learn a little about them. If possible print the photo out and stick it in the "In your hands" journal sections of this book, along with any notes about what you've seen. You're going to do this every month and look at how your little piece of the outside changes; what arrives and what departs. And by the end of the year, you'll have created a kind of calendar of your patch of the world. If you're feeling very industrious, you could even turn it into a printed version; a quick search online will provide numerous options. You can get creative at home.

NUMBERS & APPS...

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In caring for yourself

The winter months can be hard on the hands, and so to begin the year I'm going to share a recipe for a luxurious hand cream, which you can scent according to your own tastes and desires.

Former readers of *The Way Back Almanac* will be familiar with some of the ingredients, as we've previously used them to create a whipped body butter and a peppermint foot cream (and will be using them again later in the year for a whipped chocolate body mousse), so although it might seem intimidating to buy them, be assured they will be used, and you'll be cutting down on some of the chemical and preservative ingredients often used to bulk out skincare, as well as reducing your disposable plastics consumption.

CAUTION: I use various essential oils in crafts and homemade products in this book. Please note that some essential oils are not appropriate for pregnant people or those prone to seizures.

Rich hand cream

This is a simple four-ingredient recipe that requires no specialist equipment, save for a whisk. I prefer to use a blender, but you could use an electronic one, or even a hand whisk if you're up to the challenge (it really will be a challenge, though!).

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120g/4¼oz shea butter (if you dislike the strong, smoky odour of shea butter then a good-quality mango butter is an excellent substitute across all the recipes listed in the almanac where shea butter is recommended)
50ml/1½fl oz sweet almond oil
1½ tbsp arrowroot powder
10 drops of an essential oil of your choice; lavender, neroli, rose or chamomile are especially nice
A clean, sterilized jar for storage. To sterilize your jar, place in the oven on 120°C fan/140°C/275°F/gas mark 1 for 15 minutes on a clean baking sheet, then allow to cool to room temperature.

1. In a non-metallic mixing bowl, add the shea butter and whip using the whisk/blender until very light and fluffy. It should start to look like whipped cream.
2. At this stage, add the sweet almond oil and the arrowroot powder to the mix. The arrowroot powder will help reduce the "greasiness" of the final product.
3. When fully incorporated (it will look like whipped cream again), add the essential oil and gently fold in, using a silicone or wooden spoon.
4. Transfer to your clean, sterilised jar. Providing no water is introduced to the mix (for this reason I recommend using a clean teaspoon to take the amount you want to use), the hand cream will last up to four weeks. It's best to allow 5–10 minutes for it to absorb, so using before bed is perfect.

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In writing

My first choice for the #WayBackBookClub 2023 is a non-fiction book I absolutely adored: *Dark, Salt, Clear*, by Lamorna Ash.

Lamorna, whose maternal family is from Lelant and whose name has Cornish origins, enjoyed idyllic childhood holidays on the Cornish coast: catching the train to St Erth, munching sandwiches as the world whizzed by outside, the anticipation of fun to come fizzing in her veins. When she returns there as an adult, everything is different; Lamorna isn't going for a holiday, but to live and learn about what it means to build a life in a working fishing town. So it's to Newlyn she goes, beyond the end of the line in Penzance, and into a Cornwall very different to the picture-perfect holidays she recalls from childhood.

The Cornwall she moves to is a place beholden to the sea, a working fishing town decimated by a lack of investment and consideration, and the fishermen she meets face every day know that while the sea gives, it also takes. Not just lives, but livelihoods, relationships, sanity. Lamorna joins them on their boats, sleeping at sea, learning to gut fish and tie knots, all while listening to generations of men talk about the sea and their work, and their hopes and fears for the future of their town and industry. Part memoir, part biography, part nature writing, part history book, it's incredibly absorbing and beautifully written, but also funny, and, at times, a little sad. Lamorna does an incredible job of painting vividly, but honestly, a picture of what it's like to live so intertwined with the ocean, all the joys and problems that come with it, and I loved every second I spent in her Newlyn.

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To me, more than anything it feels like *Dark, Salt, Clear* is about community and what it's like to fiercely belong to people and places. I think January can often leave us feeling a little unmoored and alone after the pageantry of the festive season has passed, so I recommend *Dark, Salt, Clear* to help anchor life a little. Take a few hours, or days, to step into another world and give yourself over to the dark, strange sea.

Voices, past and present

I think most of us are a little unsettled by liminal moments of the year; whether we realize they're the cause or not, the changing of the seasons, the solstices and festivals, remind us that once upon a time we lived lives that were a little wilder, at the mercy of the elements, nature, spirits, gods and monsters. New Year's is perhaps the most liminal, and therefore loaded, of all. A night and day that exist in the in-between, traversing past, present and future simultaneously. We look back and forward all at once, so it seems only right that this most powerful and auspicious of occasions has bred a wealth of superstitions and traditions around what you must and must not do in order to guarantee a successful, healthy and happy new year.

I've gathered a few from around the world here and hopefully it won't be too late for you to add one, or more, of them to your own New Year's rituals. And if it is, there's always next year…

In Denmark, people keep any cracked or chipped crockery they have throughout the year, and then smash the dishes on the doorsteps of their friends and family to celebrate the new

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year. The following morning, you can tell how lucky you'll be (and how well liked you are) by the amount of broken crockery you have to sweep up! Also in Denmark, it's customary to "jump" into the new year by jumping off a chair, or high surface, at midnight. Your luck for the year is assured by your bombastic entrance into it!

Back to throwing things at doorsteps, there is a similar tradition in parts of Turkey, except there they throw pomegranates at their own doors. The more seeds that fly out, the more luck they'll have in the coming year (and the more cleaning up too!).

In Colombia, people believe that to ensure a year full of travel and adventure, you should take an empty suitcase and run as fast as you can around the block with it as the new year is rung in.

In upstate New York, in the United States, there is a very sweet tradition involving a peppermint pig. It began in the 1800s, died out, but has recently been revived. The pig, made of hard candy, is placed on a table and everyone assembled gets to use a candy hammer to try to chip a bit off. Eating the piece you've liberated ensures your luck for the new year. And I suppose if you're planning to give a kiss at the stroke of midnight, a little peppermint beforehand won't hurt…

In France, and New Orleans, King Cake is served. Eating it is a sign you're ready to say goodbye to the old year and welcome the new, but it can also act as a fortune teller. A token, usually a small plastic baby or a coin, is baked into the cake, and if you're lucky enough to get that slice, you're crowned the king or queen

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of the night! And you also have to host the New Year's party the following year…

In Russia, it's customary to write your wishes for the new year on a piece of paper and then burn it, but keep the ashes. The ashes are then added to a glass of champagne and drunk at midnight. Russians also believe you should be wearing new underwear as the year changes, to honour it!

Sticking with underwear, some Latin American countries believe the colour of the underwear you wear on New Year's Day will forecast the year you'll have. Choose yellow for luck, white for peace and red for scorching romance! And in Turkey, they're big believers in wearing red underwear as the clock strikes midnight, as it symbolizes good health. Who knew underwear was so important?!

Sometimes tradition can be used as an excuse to remain stagnant, or refuse change, or continue toxic and harmful behaviours, and that's something to be wary of, and to challenge when necessary. But it's important to remember that many traditions are harmless, and are often the cultural glue that bind us to each other and where we are, whether they're the big traditions that everyone knows, or the smaller, quieter ones passed down through our families. Rites and rituals that remind us who we are and where we come from, that ground us in the here and now. For that reason alone, they have huge value.

January's Voice is someone who understands deeply the need to hold onto the things that are huge to us, and to cherish them and grow them.

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I've been a fan of Josie George's delicate and astute blog, Bimblings, since 2019, and chose her memoir, *A Still Life*, as the November book club pick in the first *Way Back Almanac*, so I was beyond over the moon when she agreed to speak to me about her relationship with nature for this edition.

Josie lives in Wolverhampton with her son, in a small terraced house that she tells me is a kind of island amid industrialized land – her house was originally built for factory workers. The house is a kind of island in another way too: since childhood Josie has lived with chronic illness and pain, and is often bedbound, using a wheelchair when she is able to leave her home. It would be easy to assume, therefore, that she might not be someone who knows much about the natural world outside. That couldn't be further from the truth. Over the course of our conversation, it becomes crystal clear that Josie sees more and knows more about what nature is than pretty much everyone else I've ever met. It starts when I ask her if she can describe her relationship with nature, and she tells me that she defines it as the world as it exists outside of her.

"I tend to think of it as a stranger that I want to get to know. It's this slightly awkward, shy, 'I really like you and I'd like to get to know you better' kind of relationship with things outside. I spend quite a lot of time thinking about nature in the respect of which bits are me and which bits are not me, and how do we relate. For me, it really is a relationship, I treat it like someone I have to get to know."

There is a passage, right at the start of *A Still Life*, in which Josie has paused in the street to look at the ice on some puddles,

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and three times people assume that because she's stopped there is something wrong, that her wheelchair is broken, that she's ill, or that she's lamenting the state of the roads. They don't see what she sees, instead looking for problems to solve. I ask her if she can explain why and how it is she thinks to stop and to look at these seemingly mundane things, and she tells me it's deliberate, and a cultivated response to the world around her.

"A lot of modern life is about activities that give us a kind of tunnel vision… we spend a lot of time looking down [at phones, at our obligations] and inwards [how we expect the world to be]. I think it's when we're obsessed with doing and being busy and productive and we fill all of our time with those things that are very inward-looking, because we're taught that that's what being useful and 'good' is like; we're fixing our attention on what we're supposed to be doing and keeping it there. I'm learning that in order to have a good relationship with outside of me, I have to stop doing that; I have to put things down and look up and leave space for things to happen, so not trying to control everything."

What Josie says next absolutely blows my mind.

"I think one of the things I'm really conscious that people do with the outside, with nature, is they treat nature the same way they would treat a project: they go with an expectation that they are going to do something specific and receive a specific response or result. So there's this kind of agenda around it, like you would set a goal for work: 'I'm going to write this assignment and it's going to get an A', or 'I'm going to do this project and it's going to get me a promotion' – everything's got a goal to it. And one of the things I've really learned with

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relationships, and I mean this as much with people as with nature, is that I've got to stop treating relationships like some kind of slot machine, where I put something in and get back something specific. I'm learning to create this space where I can let myself be surprised, and stop assuming what's supposed to happen, rather than always having an agenda. That way you start to realize how much is there that you've 'tunnelled' out. I think that's when it gets really interesting."

This speech stops me in my tracks, because until now I've thought of myself as not only someone who has a good relationship with nature, but as someone who is good at having a good relationship with nature. What Josie's words make me realize is that I don't approach the outside world on its own terms, only ever my own. I go out with agendas and expectations, I don't wait to see what nature has to show me, I look for what I've decided is worth my attention. I wonder how much I've missed because of it. What haven't I seen?

"Our default is to be out in the world in a way that we set expectations and we project ourselves into everything. And it's the default so much that we don't even realize we're doing it. I always want to set the challenge of 'see what it's like when you don't. See what happens when you don't, and notice the difference.'"

But how? How do you go about undoing a lifetime of conditioning to open yourself to nature? Josie suggests that I start creating the space to do this by looking at how toddlers engage with the outside, to observe their openness and curiosity, and their gratitude for whatever it is they find.

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It's a compelling thought, made more so when Josie says that the real goal is to eventually respond to nature as if it, not I, were the toddler; whether, when it hands me a bunch of flora, I see weeds, or wonders.

This wisdom has been hard won.

"It's come about because I'm lonely, and I always want to be honest with people about that. I am like this with the world because I need company and I want to have things that I'm engaging with. I was never some kind of wonder-child who had this massive appreciation for nature and life. It was only once I got really isolated and lonely, and started to crave things that weren't me, that led me to engaging with things outside. I want to be honest about it because otherwise it makes me sound like some kind of guru on a hill. My relationship with my environment is what I've got, and aside from my relationship with myself, which I also take really seriously, it's my most enduring one. Whenever I feel like I need to belong, or I need some connection, or conversation, it's there waiting. And I need that. It's company, and stimulation. And the wonderful surprise that having relationships with other people gives you, nature gives me that."

I leave our conversation feeling like I owe Josie something. Like she's given me some kind of gift I can't repay. But I can learn from it. I can interrogate my approach to the outside world, and stop projecting a script onto it. Stop expecting, and start really seeing.

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In your hands

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