

A Turtle's Silver Bead of Quietude by Gayle Boss

The day is bright and warm for December, but the logs in the marsh pond are bare. Spring to summer into early fall they served, on sunny days, as spa to a dozen or so painted turtles. I would see them basking, splay-legged, stretching their leathery necks out full length, avid for every luscious atom of sunlight and sun-warmth.

Out of sight now, they've not escaped the harsher cold that's coming.

The water is maybe waist-deep in this pond, but a murky soup, clogged with roots and plants. One day in the fall, as water and air cooled, at some precise temperature an ancient bell sounded in the turtle brain. A signal: Take a deep breath. Each creature slipped off her log and swam for the warmer muck bottom. Stroking her way through the woven walls of plant stems, she found her bottom place. She closed her eyes and dug into the mud. She buried herself.

And then, pulled into her shell, encased in darkness, she settled into a deep stillness. Her heart slowed -- and slowed -- almost to stopping. Her body temperature dropped -- and stopped just short of freezing. Now, beneath a layer of mud, beneath the weight of frigid water and its skin of ice and skim of snow, everything in her has gone so still she doesn't need to breathe. And anyway, the iced-over pond will soon be empty of oxygen. Sunk in its bottom-mud, for six months she will not draw air into her lungs. To survive a cold that would kill her, or slow her so that predators would kill her, she slows herself beyond breath in a place where breath is not possible.

And waits. As ice locks in the marsh water and howling squalls batter its reeds and brush, beneath it all she waits. It is her one work, and it is not easy. Oxygen depletion stresses every particle of her. Lactic acid pools in her bloodstream. Her muscles begin to burn—her heart muscle, too, a deadly sign. That acid has to be neutralized, and calcium is the element to do it. Out of her bones, then out of her shell, her body pulls calcium, slowly dissolving her structure, her shape, her strength. But to move to escape -- requiring breath -- in a place where there is no oxygen -- that would suffocate her. So, though she is dissolving, every stressed particle of her stays focused on the silver bead of utter quietude.

It's this radical simplicity that will save her. And deep within it, at the heart of her stillness, something she has no need to name, but something we might call trust: that one day, yes, the world will warm again, and with it, her life.