

*What I'm going to read is excerpted from an essay by George Orwell, an author Oggie appreciated greatly. The essay is one Oggie recommended to me, called Some Thoughts on the Common Toad, and its subject is the goodness of the natural, outside world, which is something he clearly enjoyed a great deal when he found the time for it. I must apologise to Orwell fans for any violence we've done the essay in extracting from it something short enough to read here.*

BEFORE the swallow, before the daffodil, and not much later than the snowdrop, the common toad salutes the coming of spring after his own fashion, which is to emerge from a hole in the ground, where he has lain buried since the previous autumn, and crawl as rapidly as possible towards the nearest suitable patch of water. At this period, after his long fast, the toad has a very spiritual look, like a strict Anglo-Catholic towards the end of Lent. His movements are languid but purposeful, his body is shrunken, and by contrast his eyes look abnormally large. This allows one to notice, what one might not at another time, that a toad has about the most beautiful eye of any living creature. It is like gold, or more exactly it is like the golden-coloured semi-precious stone which one sometimes sees in signet-rings, and which I think is called a chrysoberyl.

I mention the toads because they are one of the phenomena of spring which most deeply appeal to me, and because the toad, unlike the skylark and the primrose, has never had much of a boost from poets. But I am aware that many people do not like reptiles or amphibians, and I am not suggesting that in order to enjoy the spring you have to take an interest in toads. The point is that the pleasures of spring are available to everybody, and cost nothing. Indeed it is remarkable how Nature goes on existing unofficially, as it were, in the very heart of London. I have seen a kestrel flying over the Deptford gasworks, and I have heard a first-rate performance by a blackbird in the Euston Road. There must be some hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of birds living inside the four-mile radius, and it is rather a pleasing thought that none of them pays a halfpenny of rent.

At any rate, spring is here, even in London North 1, and they can't stop you enjoying it. This is a satisfying reflection. How many a time have I stood watching the toads mating, or a pair of hares having a boxing match in the young corn, and thought of all the important persons who would stop me enjoying this if they could. But luckily they can't. So long as you are not actually ill, hungry, frightened or immured in a prison or a holiday camp, spring is still spring. The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it.

Excerpted from George Orwell (1946) *Some Thoughts on the Common Toad*. In George Orwell (1950) *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* [online]. Available from <http://whitewolf.newcastle.edu.au/words/authors/O/OrwellGeorge/essay/ShootingElephant/index.html> [accessed 22 February 2007].