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Findings

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Darkness and Light

They did the deed of darkness
in their own mid-light

JAMES WRIGHT

Mid-December, the still point of the turning year. It was eight in the morning and Venus was hanging like a wrecker's light above the Black Craig. The hill itself – seen from our kitchen window – was still in silouette, though the sky was lightening into a pale yellow-grey. It was a weakling light, stealing into the world like a thief through a window someone forgot to close.

The talk was all of Christmas shopping and kids' parties. Quietly through, like a coded message, an invitation arrived to a meal to celebrate the winter solstice. Only six people would be there, and no electric light.

That afternoon – it was Saturday – we took the kids to the pantomime. This year it was *The Snow Queen*. She was coldly glittery and swirled around the stage in a

platinum cloak with her comic entourage of ravens and spiders. The heroes were a boy and a brave, north-travelling girl. At one point the Snow Queen, in her silver sledge, stormed off stage left, and had she kept going, putting a girdle round the earth, she'd have been following the 56th parallel. Up the Nethergate, out of Dundee, across Scotland, away over the North Atlantic, she'd have made landfall over Labrador, swooped over Hudson's bay, and have glittered like snowfall somewhere in southern Alaska. Crossing the Bering sea, then the Sea of Okhotsk, she'd have streaked on through central Moscow, in time, if she really got a move on, to enter stage right for her next line. Of course, we have no realm of snow here, none of the complete Arctic darkness. Nonetheless, when it came time for the Snow Queen to be vanquished for another year, to melt down through a trapdoor leaving only her puddled cloak, everyone was cheered. Before she went, however, the ascendant Sun God kissed the Snow Queen in a quick, knowing, grown-up complicity. I liked that bit.

I like the precise gestures of the sun, at this time of year. When it eventually rises above the hill it shines directly into our small kitchen window. A beam crosses the table and illuminates the hall beyond. In barely an hour, though, the sun sinks again below the hill, south south-east, leaving a couple of hours of dwindling half-light. Everything we imagine doing, this time of year, we imagine doing in the dark.

I imagined travelling into the dark. Northward, so it got darker as I went. I'd a notion to sail by night, to enter into the dark for the love of its textures and wild intimacy. I had been asking around among literary people, readers of books, for instances of dark as natural phenomenon, rather than as a cover for all that's wicked, but could find few. It seems to me that our cherished metaphor of darkness is wearing out. The darkness through which might shine the Beacon of Hope. Isaiah's dark: 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.' Pity the dark: we're so concerned to overcome and banish it, it's crammed full of all that's devilish, like some grim cupboard under the stair. But dark is good. We are conceived and carried in the darkness, are we not? When my son was born, a mid-winter child, he cried pitifully at the ward's lights, and only settled to sleep when he was laid in a big pram with a black hood under a black umbrella. Our vocabulary ebbs with the daylight, closes down with the cones of our retinas. I mean, I looked up 'darkness' on the Web – and was offered Christian ministries offering to lead me to salvation. And there is always death. We say death is darkness, and darkness death.

In Aberdeen, although it was not yet five o'clock, the harbour lights were lit against the night sky. Ships were berthed right up against the street, and to reach the Orkney and Shetland ferry I had to walk under their mas-

sive prows. The ferry *Hrossa* was berthed among other ships, and though the *Hrossa* – the Norse name for Orkney – looked like a toppled office block, and was therefore a ferry, these other vessels were inexplicable mysteries to me, containers of purpose and might. Some carried huge yellow winches, others supported complex and insect-like antennae. The ships were named for strength and warriors, Scots and Norse: the *Highland Patriot*, the *Tor Viking*. I boarded the ferry and went at once out on deck, although it was cold, and leaned over the rail. There was the *Solar Prince*, (Was it not he who'd kissed the Snow Queen?), and berthed beside it, the *Edda Frigg*. The *Edda Frigg* was in the process of putting out. Where she was bound, what her purpose was I had no idea, but it pleased me that I knew what the name meant: Edda – the great Icelandic mythological poems; Frigg – Norse goddess, wife of one-eyed Odin. Off she went, the Queen of the Heavens, taking a long moment to pass, first the prow, then the low deck, then the superstructure, stirring the dirty dock water as she went.

Then it was our turn to edge out past other ships. Aberdeen's streetlights, spires and illuminated clock-towers began to recede, and there was the moon itself, above the town. I was shivering now. A sudden flock of seagulls glittered under the harbour lights. Little scenes slipped by: two men hanging on the hook of a crane; stacks of ships' containers; a sudden siren wailing, a line of parked up lorries; the hammering of metal on metal. We inched past the red-hulled *Viking Crusader*, then the *Hrossa* was out of harbour. At the end of the harbour

wall, where it crooks out into the water, stood a humble Christmas tree hung with fairy-lights.

. . . .

Some of the old hands, the Shetland folk for whom the crossing holds no novelty, were already laid flat out on benches. They had a long night ahead; it would take fourteen dark hours before they were in Lerwick for breakfast. Many were students heading home for Christmas. Some were planted in the bar. There was a man with a proper Fair Isle jersey, a girl with a hand-knit tourie. Throughout the whole of the boat – you'd to work hard to find a place to avoid it – muzak was playing. Christmas hits of yore. Paul MacCartney. The only place you could avoid Paul MacCartney was a lounge with subdued lighting and big reclining chairs. There were prints on the walls, a set of three, showing a cartoon sea with a stripy lighthouse, a fishing-boat, and below the blue waves, three huge, stupid, cheerful fish. *The Shetland Times*, which a number of the passengers were reading, bore the headline 'Day of reckoning looms for fishing'.

I'd wanted dark. Real, natural, starry dark, solstice dark, but you can't argue with the moon and the moon was almost full. It shone through a smirr of cloud, spreading its diffused light across the water. The moon had around it an aura of un-colours, the colours of oil spilled on tarmac.

Secretly, I'd been hoping for a moment at sea where there was no human light. Three hundred and sixty

degrees of winter sea, the only lights those carried by the ship itself. I wanted to be out in the night wind, in wholesome, unbanished darkness. But the *Hrossa* was, after all, only a ferry, and would hug the coast. Nevertheless, I went outside often, to stand shivering on its deck, but there was always a light somewhere. From the port side, small, northern Scottish towns, Brora, perhaps, or Helmsdale, were an orange smudge against the darker line of land. From the starboard side I could look out at the moonlit, fishless sea. Some hours out, I saw three brash lights, in a line to the east, the sea-ward side. I took them for other vessels, but they were too piled up and intense. They were North Sea oil-platforms, and even at this distance they looked frenzied. Maybe this was where the *Solar Prince* and the *Viking Warrior* were bound – on the urgent business of oil. As the ferry drove on, the rigs grew smaller, until they were at the edge of vision, at the edge of the night, as I imagine distant icebergs must look, only on fire.

Then, alone on the metal deck, damp and moonlit, just when I fancied darkness might be complete, I heard a faint call. The boat throbbed on, leaving behind a wave as straight as a glacier. A human call. I must have been mistaken, but listened and – it came again. I scanned the water, there were only the waves, the wide, oil-dark sea. It gave me a fright, and had anyone else been out on deck I might have tugged their arm and said, 'Listen!' I'm glad I was alone because, so help me, it was only Elton John. Elton John, piped though a speaker onto the deck. The music was so nearly drowned

out by the ship's engines that I'd just caught the top notes. I bent down, stuck my ear next to the speaker and yes, it was Elton John, singing, of all things: 'Don't let the sun go down on me'.

I gave up on the dark then and went below for a drink.

Around midnight, the pilot-boat came out to accompany the ferry between the archipelago of low islands into Kirkwall. On all their reefs and hazards, warning lights winked.

* * *

The Orkney islands, if you don't know them, are green and supine, for the most part; a sculptural, wind-honed archipelago. Many of the islands are inhabited. The islands are whale-shapes, as their poet George McKay Brown has noted. Few trees impede the wind. Water, salt and fresh, in wide bays or lochs or channels, is always to hand, lightening and softening the land it encircles. The land is fertile, the people prosperous, Norse, liberal, and they live in two main towns and innumerable farms under a huge, energetic sky. No weather lasts long, and you can see new weather coming a long way off. There are frequent scraps of rainbow. And birds – at any point you can stop walking, or pull over and lower the car window and hear the cries of peewits and tremulous curlews. The few inland hills are peat-brown. And at the west, the islands rise to address the Atlantic with fulmar-tenented cliffs. There is everything you need, except perhaps trees, and more and more people are moving

from the south to join the islanders, in search of what they call 'a real community'. There's that phrase you hear so often: 'we fell in love with it'.

It had been a long night, and still dark when I woke in the morning. In a hired car, I drove out of Kirkwall toward Finstown, stopping in a layby beside a bottle-bank to watch the coming daylight gild the water of the bay. On a stone-built pier a row of oyster-catchers was turned to windward. The light was without energy. Above the sleeping shape that was the isle of Shapinsay, the sky mustered a few greys with just a line of creamy yellow. I drove on out of the village, then turned north over peat-moor. There were cottages by the roadside, bungalows mostly, few nowadays with the traditional flagstone roofs. On Burgar hill, three wind-turbines turned sluggishly, and a ragged skein of geese flew above them. The islands have been farmed for a very long time, and if you climb a hill and look down onto the green lands below, the farmhouses are so plentiful they look as though they've been shaken out from a box.

Six hours of daylight, a meagre ration. I'd an appointment at sunset, about three o'clock, so there was time for a spot of bird-watching, and a walk on the cliffs. I drove down straight tracks between farms and wire-fences, left the car in a layby at the shore, and walked up onto the headland called Marwick Head. On the sea below the cliffs a lobster boat hung with pink buoys bounced through the water. The westerly wind brought squalls in like grey wings. Only a few fulmars were at home, the puffins' burrows were empty, waiting for

spring. A pair of ravens, Odin's birds, seemed to follow me along the cliff-top, making comments to each other in their lovely intimate cronking. Underfoot were brown and brittle dry sea-pinks.

Last night I'd wanted dark, but was frustrated. Now conversely, it was clear light I was hoping for. I was going to Maes Howe, and if the visit was to be effective, the southern sky had to be clear of cloud, at least for a few crucial moments at sunset. I walked on the cliffs at Marwick Head, keeping a weather-eye on the banks of cloud that filled the southern sky. Now and again a shaft of light broke through, illuminating the land below. Headlands jutted out into the sea, each behind the last. Some are tremendously high. St John's Head, on Hoy, falls 1,300 feet to the sea. I could just see the famous stack called the Old Man of Hoy standing proud of the cliffs behind. Then, farther, the few isolated mountains of the Scottish mainland appeared to float on a pool of citrine light.

I like the sun's particular gestures, and I like the signs of mid-winter life: the wintering geese in empty fields, a lone woman walking along a farm-track in boots and coat, a scarf over her head.

A drive, a spot of bird-watching, a sandwich and a walk on the cliffs and by half-past two what daylight had been grudgingly dealt out was being gathered in again. The distant hills were black and bulky. When I got back to the car, the sun was so low it was shining directly through the windscreen, dazzling bright, and this was a good sign. As I drove, the empty winter fields revealed a

secret presence of water, in dips and reed-beds, orange coloured and aglow like precious things. I even saw a hen-harrier, gliding above some rust-tipped reeds at a loch-side, its wings held in the shallowest of Vs. The dead of winter, so called.

I have a friend who is both a poet and a church-goer and I was grumbling to him about the redundant metaphor of Darkness and Light. I was saying that the dark, the natural, courteous dark, was too much maligned, and frankly, I blamed Christians. The whole idea wanted refreshing. We couldn't see the real dark for the metaphorical dark. Because of the metaphorical dark, the death-dark, we were constantly concerned to banish the natural dark. Enough of this 'Don't let the sun go down on me' stuff. I told my friend I wanted to go into the dark, that I'd a notion to visit Maes Howe at solstice. At that he raised an eyebrow. 'Maes Howe?' he said. 'But Maes Howe is a metaphor, isn't it?'

The building nowadays known as Maes Howe is a Neolithic chambered cairn, a tomb where, 5000 years ago, they interred the bones of the dead. In its long, long existence it has been more forgotten about than known, but in our era it is open to the public, with all that means of tickets and guides and explanatory booklets. It stands, a mere grassy hump in a field, in the central plain of Mainland Orkney. There is a startling collection of other Neolithic sites nearby. To reach Maes Howe I took the road that passes over a thin isthmus between two lochs.

On the west side is a huge brooding stone circle, the Ring of Brodgar. On the east, like three elegant women conversing at a cocktail party, are the standing stones of Stenness. The purpose of these may be myterious, but a short seven miles away is the Neolithic village called Skara Brae. There is preserved a huddle of roofless huts, dug half underground into midden and sand-dune. There, you can marvel at the domestic normality; that late Stone Age people had beds and cupboards and neighbours and beads. You can feel both their presence, their day-to-day lives, and their utter absence. It's a good place to go. It recalibrates your sense of time.

Two men were standing at Maes Howe car park. The taller, older man was wearing a white shirt and improbable tartan trousers. As I stepped out of the car, he shook his head sadly. The younger man was dressed for outdoors, somewhat like a traffic warden, with a woollen hat pulled down to his eyes and a navy-blue coat. For a moment we all looked at each other. The taller man spoke first.

'Not looking good, I'm afraid.'

The timing was right, the sun was setting, but...

'Cloud.' said the tall man.

'Can't be helped.' I replied.

'Will you go in, anyway? You can't always tell, you just need a moment when the cloud breaks...'

Alan, an Englishman in Historic Scotland tartan trousers, led me into a little shop to issue a ticket. The shop's housed in an old water-mill, some distance from the tomb. There is as yet no visitor centre or the like.

The shop sold guide books and fridge magnets and tea-towels. From the window you could see over the main road to the tomb.

'Tell you what,' he said. 'I'll give you a ticket so you can come back tomorrow, if you like, but I can't give you one for the actual solstice, Saturday. We start selling them at 2.30 on the actual solstice. It's first come, first served.'

'How many people come?'

'Well, we can accommodate 25, at a pinch.'

But today there was only myself.

The young guide, Rob, was waiting outside. A workman's van hurtled past, then we crossed the road, entered through a wicket gate and followed a path across the field. We were walking toward the tomb by an indirect route that respected the wide ditch around the site. Sheep were grazing the field, and a heron was standing with its aristocratic back to us. There was a breeze, and the shivery call of a curlew descending. On all sides there are low hills, holding the plain between them. To the south, the skyline is dominated by two much bigger, more distant hills, a peak and a plateau. Though you wouldn't know it from here, they belong to another island, to Hoy. Above these dark hills, in horizontal bars, were the offending clouds.

You enter into the inner chamber of the tomb by a low passage way more than fifty-feet long. It's more of a journey than a gateway. You don't have to crawl on hands and knees, but neither can you walk upright. The stone roof bears down on your spine; a single enormous

slab of stone forms the wall you brush with your left shoulder. You must walk in that stooped position just a moment too long, so when you're admitted to the cairn two sensations come at once: you're glad to stand, and the other is a sudden appreciation of stone. You are admitted into a solemn place which is not a heart at all, or even a womb, but a cranium. You are standing in a high, dim stone vault. There is a thick soundlessness, like a recording studio or a strong-room. A moment ago, you were in the middle of a field, with the wind and curlews calling. That world has been taken away, and the world you have entered into is not like a cave, but a place of artifice, of skill. Yes, that's it, what you notice when you stand and look around is cool, dry, applied skill. Across 5000 years you can still feel their self-assurance.

The walls are of red sandstone, dressed into long rectangles, with a tall sentry-like buttress in each corner to support the cobbled roof. The passage to the outside world is at the base of one wall. Set waist-high into the other three are square openings into cells which disappear into the thickness of the walls. That's where they laid the dead, once the bones had been cleaned of flesh by weather and birds. The stone blocks which would once have sealed these graves lie on the gravel floor. And the point is, the ancients who built this tomb orientated it precisely: the long passageway faces exactly the setting midwinter sun. Consequently, for the few days around the winter solstice a beam of the setting sun shines along the passage, and onto the tomb's back wall.