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LRB | Vol. 25 No. 24 dated 18 December 2003 | Kathleen Jamie



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## Into the Dark

Kathleen Jamie

Mid-December. 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 silhouette, though the sky was lightening to 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 children's parties. Quietly, 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 a Saturday - we took the children 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 stormed off stage-left in her silver sledge, 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 Bay, and glittered like snowfall somewhere in southern Alaska. Crossing the Bering Sea, then the Sea of Okhotsk, she'd have streaked on through 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, no 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, the ascendant Sun God kissed the Snow Queen in quick, knowing, grown-up complicity. I liked that bit.

The sun's gestures are precise at this time of year. When it eventually rises above the hill it shines directly through 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-west, 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 a 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 stairs. But dark is good. We are conceived and carried in the darkness. When my son was born, a midwinter child, he cried pitifully at the ward's lights, and settled to sleep only 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 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.

n 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 massive prows. The ferry was berthed among other ships, and though the *Hrossey* - 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 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. 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. Aberdeen's streetlights, spires and illuminated clock towers began to recede, and there was the moon, above the town. I was shivering now. 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 *Hrossey* was out of the harbour. At the end of the harbour wall, where it crooks out into the water, stood a Christmas tree hung with fairy lights.

Some of the old hands, the Shetland folk, were already laid flat out on benches. They had a long night ahead: it would be 14 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 boat, muzak was playing. Old Christmas hits. Paul McCartney. The only place you could avoid it 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 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. I'd been hoping for a moment at sea when there was no human light: 360° 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 *Hrossey* was, after all, only a ferry, and would hug the coast. Nevertheless, I went outside often, to stand shivering on deck. There was always a light somewhere. From the port side, small 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 seaward 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 I listened and - it came again. I scanned the water: there were only the waves, the 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. 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 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 past the archipelago of low islands into Kirkwall. On all their reefs and hazards, warning lights winked.

The Orkney Islands are green and supine, for the most part; a sculptural, wind-honed archipelago. Many of them are inhabited. The islands are whale-shapes, as their poet George Mackay Brown 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 hear the cries of peewits and tremulous curlews. The few inland hills are peat-brown. And in the West, the islands rise to address the Atlantic with fulmar-tenanted cliffs. There is everything you need, apart from trees.

It was still dark when I woke in the morning. In a hired car, I drove out of Kirkwall towards Finstown, stopping in a lay-by beside a bottle bank to watch the coming daylight gild the water of the bay. On a stone pier a row of oyster-catchers was turned to windward. The light was without energy. Above the sleeping shape that was the island 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 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 at the green lands below, the farmhouses are so plentiful they look as though they've been shaken out of a box.

I had 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 at the shore, and walked up onto Marwick Head. In the sea below the cliffs a lobster boat hung with pink buoys bounced through the water. The westerly wind brought in squalls 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 intimate cronking. Underfoot were brown and brittle sea pinks.

Last night I'd wanted dark, but was frustrated. Now 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 for a few crucial moments at sunset. I kept a weather-eye on the banks of cloud that filled the sky at present. 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 1300 feet to the sea. I could just see the famous stack called the Old Man of Hoy standing proud of the cliffs. Further away, 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 midwinter life: the wintering geese in empty fields, a lone woman walking along a farm-track in boots and coat, a scarf over her head. 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. 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 churchgoer, 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 now known as Maes Howe is a Neolithic chambered cairn, a tomb where, five thousand 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 in the way of tickets and guides and explanatory booklets. It stands, a grassy hump in a field, in the central plain of Mainland Orkney. There is a startling collection of 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 mysterious, but a short seven miles away is the Neolithic village Skara Brae. Preserved there is a huddle of roofless huts, dug half-underground into midden and sand-dune. 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 recalibrates your sense of time.

Two men were standing in the car park at Maes Howe. 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. Alan, the taller one, spoke first. 'Not looking good, I'm afraid. Cloud.'

He took me into a little shop to issue a ticket. 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 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, went through a wicket gate and followed a path across the field. We were walking towards the tomb by an indirect route that respected the wide ditch around the site. Sheep were grazing in 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 were low hills, holding the plain between them. To the south, the skyline was 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 the inner chamber of the tomb by a low passageway more than fifty feet long. 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 forms the wall you brush with your left shoulder. You have to walk in that stooped position just a moment too long, so when you're admitted to the cairn two sensations come at once: one is that 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, as in a recording studio, or a strongroom. 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 is not like a cave, but a place of artifice, of skill. Across five thousand years you can still feel the self-assurance.

The walls are of red sandstone, dressed into long rectangles, with a tall sentry-like buttress in each corner to support the corbelled 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. The ancients who built this tomb oriented it precisely: the long passageway exactly faces 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. In recent years, people have crept along the passageway at midwinter to witness this, the complicit kiss. Some, apparently, find it overwhelming.

We crossed the field. The heron took to the air. I dawdled behind. My guide, the young Rob, was waiting at the entrance, which is just a low square opening at the bottom of the mound, dangling his torch. I glanced back at the outside world, the road, the clouded sky over Hoy's hills, then we crept inside, and for a long minute walked doubled-over, until Rob stood and I followed.

Inside was bright as a Tube train, and the effect was brutal. I'd expected not utter darkness, but perhaps a wombish red, and Rob was carrying a torch, but this light revealed every crack, every joint and fissure in the ancient stonework. At once a man's voice said: 'Sorry, I'll switch it off,' but the moment was lost. I'd been forewarned: as he sold me the ticket, Alan had told me that surveyors were inside the cairn, with all their equipment. And here they were. In the fierce white light, it was like that moment which can occur in mid-life, when you look at your mother and realise with a shock that she is old.

The surveyors, commissioned by Historic Scotland, were working inside the tomb, and had been for days. A huge implement - I couldn't tell if it was a torch or a camera - lay on a schoolroom chair. There was a telephone in one of the grave-cells. There were two surveyors. One was folded, foetus-like, into the little cell in the back wall. I could see only his legs. He grunted as he shifted position. His older colleague seemed glad of a break. He stood, a portly man in a black tracksuit and fleece jacket, and stretched his back. Somehow he dimmed the light and the tomb settled back into restful gloom. The outside world was a square at the far end of the long passageway. There would be no sunset. 'Too bad,' the surveyor said.

Rob, hunched in his woolly hat, drew breath and raised his torch as though to begin the guided tour, but he paused. 'Been here before?' he asked me.

'Several times.'

He said: 'We're on the Web now, you know,' and gestured with the torch to a camera mounted on the Neolithic wall. 'Live. Don't go picking your nose.'

'Watch your eyes!' the voice from the grave-chamber said; then came a detonating flash.

The tomb had fallen into disuse. Four thousand winters passed, four thousand solstices. Then a party of Vikings arrived en route to the Crusades. They broke into the tomb to take refuge from a storm, and probably cleared out what they found inside: bones, backfill. The Vikings passed the tedious hour by hatching names and witticisms on the stones - Maes Howe contains the best collection of Runic inscriptions outside Iceland. 'Crusaders broke into this howe,' they say. 'Many a woman has walked stooping in here.' The Vikings went away, and Maes Howe was again half-forgotten, a fairy place, a strange mound on a heath. Generations lived and died. We invented electric light, the internal combustion engine, we exploited oilfields, developed telephones and TVs, to dispel the winter dark - and now at solstice we come, as no one has done for nearly five thousand years, to witness a little beam of sunlight creep through the darkness onto a stone wall.

The surveyors had been beset by technical problems. They were behind schedule and fed up. The younger man unfolded himself from the grave-cell, and I asked him what he was doing. 'Just stereophotography,' he said. 'Pass me that light meter, would you?' He folded himself back into the grave.

Stereophotography, like our own eyes, gives us a 3D image, and could be used to generate a complete 3D image of the interior of the tomb on a screen. It would be an absolutely precise record of what it's like in there. The work had been commissioned because Historic Scotland is anxious to know if the building is moving. There are tiny fissures in the stonework - that brash light revealed them all. They might have appeared when the building was new. On the other hand, they might be more recent. The surveyors would make their images, and then in 18 months come back and do it all again, and then, by comparing the two results, they would be able to discern the slightest difference, the slightest shift in the structure. 'There are other problems too,' Rob said. 'Look.' He pointed out a green smear on a high stone. 'Algae.' Many visitors come creeping along the entrance tunnel to marvel at the tomb, and they breathe. The building wasn't designed to be breathed in and lit. It was designed to be dead in, and dark. Breath and light mean algae, and algae is damaging. A tiny humidity recorder had been installed to monitor moisture levels.

Then there was the roof. It was not original, but the work of enthusiastic Victorian archaeologists. They had awakened Maes Howe out of its long sleep, by entering through the roof, as you might crack a boiled egg. Though they had repaired their damage, it was not to the Neolithic standard, and a watchful eye was being kept on it. And there was more: when it was constructed, the tomb had been clad in waterproof clay before being covered in a thick layer of earth and turf, but the waterproofing had since been punctured. This damage, too, could admit insidious, creeping moisture. Though it was known that the waterproofing had been damaged no one could tell exactly where. Rather than scalp all the earth from the monument to investigate, they were doing it the modern way: a pulse-radar survey. Then there were the carvings. Broaches in the waterproof clay might admit not only damp, but tiny scouring particles of the clay itself. The worry was that, as these particles washed into the interior and migrated down the stonework, they might slowly be wearing away the carvings there. Rob lit with his torch Maes Howe's famous little lion, a delicate carving about the size of your fist, etched on a tall slab. It was Viking work, but the tomb contains Neolithic carvings, too: strange, nervy conjoined triangle and diamond shapes. As Rob shone his torch on the little lion, instinctively I lifted my hand to touch it, to make a gesture of connection.

'Please don't,' he said. That's why we are minded by a guide. Too many wondering, sweaty fingers would soon wear the carvings away.

'We don't know for sure if they are wearing away,' Rob said. 'That's what these surveyors are here to find out. Laser scanning. If they make a laser scan of each surface, and then repeat it in 18 months, they'd be able to tell, because the lasers can measure losses of 1000th of a millimetre.' He shoved his torch in his pocket. 'It's a World Heritage Site now, you see. You can't mess with a World Heritage Site. But it's not doing too badly. I mean, how many other five-thousand-year-old buildings do you know?'

'Last longer than a Wimpey house,' said a voice from the cell at the back.

'So that's why they're taking all these measurements. And who'll pay for it? The tax-payer. That's who. The tax-payer.'

I'd been thwarted the night before in my hope of sailing into real northern dark, and disappointed again this short midwinter day that no beam of sunlight would enter the tomb. But it occurred to me, as I talked to Rob and the older surveyor, that I would never again get so close to my Neolithic ancestors. Had not skilled workmen stood in this very tomb at the end of a working day, and taken a moment to survey their handiwork? Real people, flesh on their bones, tools in their hands, words on their lips in some language now utterly lost? I glanced behind me. The younger surveyor was sitting hunched in the cell, his knees bent up. He sighed, and passed a weary hand over his face.

We spoke about the fire in Edinburgh which destroyed some buildings in the Old Town, and wondered if they

could be rebuilt. The surveyor, true to his profession, asked if anyone actually knew what they looked like. Had they photographs? Drawings? Measurements? I remarked that they'd rebuilt parts of bombed-out Warsaw using the paintings of Canaletto's nephew, Bernardo Bellotto.

'You could build a replica of this, now,' Rob said. 'No, seriously, with all this data you could build an exact replica of Maes Howe.'

Rob stayed with the surveyors while I made the smallest and most changing of journeys, squeezing down a passageway and out into the world of sound and moving air. Dry winter grasses nodded in the breeze. The sun had well and truly gone down on me, the clouds in the southern sky were glowing ruby-red above the hills. There had been no starry dark, and no sunset play of light. Back at the shop, Alan, in his Historic Scotland tartan breeks, stood behind the counter. We had a conversation about technology, about how the interior of a Neolithic tomb could be seen on a website. Then the phone rang. It was a local man telling Alan the website had a glitch, that he'd have to unplug everything and plug it all in again. The south-western clouds were garnet-coloured now. Alan called the tomb on the phone, asked Rob to fiddle with the webcam, then hung up.

'Technology, eh?' He shook his head. 'Shall I show you what we do when it all breaks down?' He crossed the shop, picking up from a wicker basket two frisbees, one red, one blue. 'If I hold them up in that window there, I can send a signal to Rob. Red frisbee means: "Stay over at the tomb, more visitors are coming." Blue means: "You can come back now."' "

It was almost dark when I got back to the car, and the two surveyors were emerging from the tomb to go for their tea. One of them lifted his hand high in salutation, and for a moment they looked like astronauts emerging from a capsule after a successful mission.

That's what we'd been talking about, Alan and me. What, if the world lasts, would people five thousand years hence find worth saving of our age? Something at the top of our competence, something that expressed the drama of our times and beliefs. Is there anything they'd come from afar to see, and find almost overwhelming? Alan said there would be no need to come from afar. You'll be able to have it all in virtual reality. Like now, with all this stereophotography and laser scanning and photogrammetry and what-have-you, you could switch on your computer at home, put on your goggles and walk stooping into Maes Howe.

The Apollo moonlanding gear. Those contraptions like washing-machines wrapped in tinfoil that were launched into lightless space sometime in the Oil Age. That's what we should keep. And maybe an offshore rig, where men worked day and night, slathered in the stuff, that we could have heat and movement and light. Let the future marvel over that.

In Stromness's narrow, 18th-century street, it was time for some Christmas shopping. I wandered into a toyshop, and picked up a silver plastic tiara. My daughter had liked the Snow Queen, she would love this. Standing there in the bright shop with the tiara in my hand, turning it so it sparkled, I was thinking about light. I suppose I'd been hoping for a trick of the light at Maes Howe. No, trick was the wrong word. The tomb-builders had constructed their cairn to admit a single beam of solstice light: it was the bending of a natural phenomenon to a human end, somewhere between technology and art. But not art either: drama. 'Nowhere,' George Mackay Brown said, 'is the drama of dark and light played out more starkly than in the North.' A very ancient drama, going right back to the Neolithic. Were they the first people, I wondered, to articulate this metaphor of light and dark, of life and death?

Then the shopkeeper said: 'Enjoy it while it lasts.' She nodded towards the plastic tiara. 'My little girl used to love these things, all glittery and bright. But she's 14 now, and wears nothing but black.'

The surveyors finished their task very late that night, and were gone on the morning ferry, leaving the tomb

ready for its little crowd of solstice visitors. I almost envied them the chance to move and work in the thick silence of the chambered cairn. Few people can have spent so long within its confines since it was built. You pass a light-beam over the stone and record the infinitesimal time it takes to return to source. Light's echo. My ventures into light and dark had been ill-starred. I'd had no dramatic dark, neither at sea nor in the tomb, and no resurrecting beam of sunlight. But lasers are light, aren't they? Intensified, organised light. I'd crept into Maes Howe at solstice, hoping for Neolithic technology; what I'd found was the technology of the 21st century. Here were skilled people still making measurements by light and time.

For five thousand years we have used darkness as the metaphor of our mortality. We were at the mercy of merciless death, which is darkness. When we died, they sent a beam of midwinter light in among our bones. What a tender, potent gesture. In the Christian era, we were laid in our graves to face the rising sun. We're still mortal, still don't want to die, don't want our loved ones to die. That's why the surveyors waved so heartily - if I'd spent ten days working in the house of the dead, dammit, I'd come out waving, too. We have not banished death, but we have banished the dark. We have light, we have oil-fields and electricity and lasers. And by the light we have made, we can see that there are, metaphorically speaking, cracks. We are doing damage. The surveyors poring over the tomb are working in an anxious age. We look about the world, by the light we have made, and realise it's all vulnerable, and all worth saving, and no one can do it but us. And if it all goes to hell on a handcart, we have the data, we can build a replica.

I could have waited a couple of days, then joined that little group squeezing into the tomb on the solstice proper, but I had my own midwinter rituals to observe. We always put up the Christmas tree on the 21st, and the children decorate it. I couldn't miss that. And there was dinner with friends to look forward to. I would leave the next day. But there was still time for an evening walk. The houses at the edge of town were lit, their curtains drawn. Beyond the houses, beyond the reach of the yellow streetlights, is the golf course. The golf course! Shorn and mellow by day, in the dark it reverted to the wild. Its gentle mounds and slopes seemed almost to breathe, to edge closer than by daylight. A narrow road bound by a stone wall and a ditch bisects it, and where the road ends at the shore is a large fisherman's hut with lobster creels stacked on its lee side, and beyond that - the sea. Not the open sea, but a fierce channel between two islands. I huddled against the hut, sheltering from the wind. Out in the night was the low, shapely island of Graemsay, with lighthouses at either end, and behind it the cliffs of Hoy. Vast tonnages of water fight through a narrow channel here, to flood or drain the great natural anchorage of Scapa Flow. The surging sea, the wind, the cliffs' bulk against the night sky was, forgive me, sublime. There was much sound - wind, and waves - but also a silent light-show: the beams of many lighthouses shone and faded shyly across the water, each to its own pulse. The pathways they made on the black surface of the sea slipped in and out of existence. Here were all the textures of darkness - bulwarks of land, shifting sea, dark starry sky, and the consolation of lighthouses. And in the distance, among further dark islands, rose the flare-stack of the Flotta oil refinery. Oil is brought there from the North Sea fields by tanker or pipeline, and by day and night excess gas is burned off, in an orange flame. Now they're experimenting with tide-power, with setting turbines right here in the tidal race between these islands. The hope is that the sea can generate a constant power that will be renewable and unpolluting. Wind turbines are fine, but sometimes the wind drops. There's the sun, but as we know, sometimes it's obscured by clouds. Tides and the moon, however, you can rely on.

I don't know if the people who crept into Maes Howe for the solstice were rewarded with a beam of sunlight. And if it came, did they part to let it through, like a doctor at an accident? I was at home again by then, and we were going out for dinner. Our friends' cottage was inviting in candlelight, and the curtains were open to show black night pressed against the windows. In the warm light, we enjoyed a half-joking, symbolic meal. We ate stuffed red peppers, to symbolise, our host said, the rising sun. Carrot-sticks were its warming rays, and green beans, presented with a flourish, represented the shoots of spring. We drank a toast, because tonight was midwinter's night, the night of the complicit kiss, and tomorrow the light would begin its return.

**Kathleen Jamie's** *Selected Poems* was published in March 2002.

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20 September 2005

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