

Nature; Magic; Alchemy; Reverence; Remembering

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First Impressions

Here in the north of Scotland we're only ever sure of one thing about the weather – its relentless unpredictability. It often seems like we're visited by all four seasons in a single day. Even as a native I find that unsettling and a real challenge for my animal body, although I do enjoy the changing skies that roll overhead and think it must be quite tiresome living below a predictable canopy.

When a single 'bonnie' day does arrive we often remark, "well that's our summer" in typically *dour* fashion. However, we are usually blessed with one good week of settled weather each year. Even as a child I had an awareness of the need to make the most of it and, because of the long summer days this far north, I certainly did – letting the additional light, rather than the clock, guide my playtime schedule (which makes as much sense to me now as it did then!)

Fortunately for me, because there is little darkness here at the height of summer, playtime seemed to never end. That was actually a blissful time which I look back on fondly – and it *was* a simpler time, prior to the ubiquitous iPhone, PlayStation and Netflix (we did have games consoles but they didn't seem to hold our attention like the outdoors did!). Time changed over the summer months; I could do so much in a single summer day that the holidays may as well have been a lifetime. It seemed surreal, and quite devastating, when they inevitably drew to a close – as they had a terrible habit of doing abruptly each year.

This week has been that special week in the summer . . . but more about that later.

I'm not sure that I had much awareness of growing up in a small town, it was just where I lived. We visited bigger and busier places but I didn't really care to make comparisons; life centred on the physical encounter with the world back then – analysis was irrelevant and certainly less fun. Familiarity and changelessness, hallmarks of many small towns, were also lost on me . . . as was any sense of feeling safe; not because I did *not* feel safe but because I was blissfully unaware that children could feel unsafe.

I've returned to live here after being away for most of my adult life. Although much about the town and surrounding area remains the same I see it in a very different way; the magic that existed here when I was a child *still* exists but now I pay attention to it and reflect on it – sometimes, as now, I even write about it. Back then it just was. It washed over me and subtly crept through my being and sense of self. In fact, it expanded my sense of self to include the particularity of here and I realize now how fortunate I was to be raised in a place which crept through me as this place did.

The town has two beaches, one on the east side and one to the West. They have quite different characters – siblings, one like its father and one like its mother. Between the two

lies the harbour area which at one time pulsed with fishing activity. Indeed it was the economic foundation on which the town was born but has sadly declined in recent decades - although it has taken on somewhat of a new life as a marina.

South of the town is mostly farmland and beyond that one can just catch a glimpse of the mountains which glide off into the Cairngorms National Park. Looking to the north on a clear day one finds a chain of elegant hills over the firth. They must be twenty-five miles off but often seem like you could reach out and touch them. This is especially true from the west side; I've walked along the celebrated Moray coastal trail many times in low light conditions but with shafts of brightness illuminating those distant peaks, highlighting their features and seemingly drawing them closer.

That is one of my favourite places because of the intense peace and tranquillity that it affords, and because its hidden nooks and crannies have become retreats for me. But I also enjoy walking on the east side of town, particularly between the rolling beach dunes and the river which slowly winds its way into the firth. With the tide out a new set of trails emerge which make for easier walking than the soft beach sand and so I try to time my walks there to fit with that watery schedule. This is the domain of ospreys, heron's, ducks, sea birds of all kinds, deer, foxes and the occasional otter. One doesn't have to wander far to enter a wooded area which, although pleasant to be in, has an undeniable eeriness to it - probably because of the crumbling WW2 battlements that remain there.

On the other side of the river and a little further into town one comes upon the old railway line. Strangely I had little contact with it as a child but that can be explained because, being a town built on a hill, I lived on the other side and tended to stay over there. Shortly after departing from town the old railway line becomes a dusty track used by the occasional farm vehicle. I walk here most days and never fail to be struck by the sheer variety and abundance of life that adorns it. For a dusty old track which has had only trains and tractors for company it's really quite resplendent. I don't know much about trees or plants so I can't explain how it came to be like this but I theorize that perhaps the frequent and close passers-by helped to spread seedlings which now comprise the plethora of green things living there.

The surrounding farmland also seems particularly verdant which may be partly accounted for by the small loch near-by and the network of streams that meander across the terrain. I believe that the canal, which one reaches a couple of miles along the track, is a remnant of ancient waterway engineering designed to allow boats from the firth to come in-land towards a castle which now stands in ruins further south. Whatever the original intention the outcome has been to provide excellent conditions not only for plants, shrubs and trees but also for a host of wildlife whose lives take place on or near the loch.

I seldom encounter people this far up the track - even though it's only a few miles from town - so I surmise that most local residents have not had the pleasure of encountering these things to the extent I have. Unsurprisingly the road that links my town with the next runs parallel to and no more than a few hundred metres from all this enchantment, yet it may as well be on the dark side of the moon; I'm quite sure people are born, live and die

here without ever knowing this place exists. I think of Thoreau's seminal essay 'Walking' which comments on the importance of human contact with nature. The fact that access to this place, as with so many other special spots around here, is achieved only by walking adds poignancy to his words.

Nature as Alchemist

It's overcast today and cooler. If it's true that we only have one week of summer here each year then summer is surely over – this week has been truly breath-taking. Just as when I was a child the clear skies and increased temperatures have roused me into action. I've walked twice most days this week, enjoyable in itself but also the perfect antidote to the effects of shrivelling up in front of a computer screen. For me there's an alchemy in walking through a natural environment, a remembering hard-wired into my primal body which never fails to initiate a system-wide reboot and bring me, literally, back to my senses.

Although I'm not a particularly keen early-riser I couldn't resist taking a daybreak stroll this week. I drove to my usual parking spot close to the coastal trail but someone had beaten me to it. No problem, there were other places to park and I was glad that at least one other person had similarly decided that this natural magic was simply too potent to let slip by. The path leading to the trail is steeply uphill at first so I assumed, given my unfamiliarity with this hour, that I'd have to struggle my way up consoled by the pleasant thought of the downhill stretch on the other side! But it wasn't so. In fact, quite the opposite occurred, my body showing an apparent affinity for this time of day.

The walk lasted around two hours with the peaceful flowing of the firth providing a sublime backdrop most of the way. It was all sublime; the sharp freshness of the morning air, the sweet sound of enthusiastic and busy birds, the decadent blue sky and the surrounding hills. Reaching a stretch of beach I put myself down on a large piece of driftwood to rest. A few small fishing boats were already working not far from shore but they were quietly going about their business with no impact on the daybreak serenity. In fact I may have been ignorant to any peripheral sound since I was held, trance-like, by the gentle moving of the water and the soft arrival of each new wave on the shore. To think I'd almost turned my alarm off and gone back to sleep! (Read More about this here)

But as incredible as this joyful time in nature certainly was, it was not the highlight of my week. For not only was this a week of remarkable weather conditions but it also saw the arrival of a full moon! Picture the scene; a small town built on a hill with beaches and water on two sides, and verdant farmland on the others; an empty pale blue sky gently yellowing as the day creeps on; shape-shifting pink clouds drifting by; as day turns to evening an intense sunset illuminates the distant hills and, where any clouds have stalled on their journey, corridors of light pierce through, creating what seems like perfect circles on the water; on the other side of town the moon proudly emerges to dominate the sky and will, in the following hours, add its own illumination to the terrain below. A potent enchantment abounds; peace has fallen over this small patch of the Earth and all life seems to know it.

I knew it and wanted to maximum my nature time. But where would be the best place to absorb myself in it - the coastal trail, the forest, one of the beaches, or perhaps the river which seemed to rest directly beneath the moon as viewed from the top of the hill. Maybe I should even venture further afield for this particularly special occasion. In the end I settled on the railway line, not sure why, but perhaps because it was the least likely to be occupied and therefore would afford the greatest chance to enjoy this potency without distraction.

The first half mile or so is enclosed by small patches of forest on either side. I quite enjoy this because they act as a wind break on wilder days and the bird activity, particularly the bird song, tends to put me at ease - like a friendly and familiar welcome. I also enjoy the proximity of this wildness because, as well as the birds, little things are scuttling around in the undergrowth reminding me of the micro-world that exists so close but yet is so alien to us. The presence of life, I've noticed, is almost always comforting. As I gaze to the south I see a clear track before me, inviting me forward. I oblige and quicken my pace as my stride settles into a familiar rhythm.

Forest soon gives way to farmland. A buzzard passes overhead pursued by some form of corvid, a displeased one at that! I watch them argue until they decide to go their separate ways - I'm not sure who won this time or, indeed, what the prize was. Perhaps because my attention was drawn to this aerial encounter I hadn't noticed that I now had an uninterrupted view of the moon. It had climbed just high enough to take a peak over some distant forested hills. It was still quite small and not particularly bright, like a giant version of those floating lanterns which have become popular ways to mark special occasions. This lantern, however, would stay aloft for some time yet and would increase its brightness as the evening pressed on.

I pressed on, gently delighting in the sensory bonanza that this exceptional evening was offering. One can walk for about four miles on this dusty track before it disappears into overgrown vegetation and apparent oblivion. Although I didn't intend to go that far I was letting my feelings be my guide. After all I had set this evening aside for exploration so had no schedule to keep. A quarter mile to the east of the track lies the small, and fairly well hidden, water-world of the loch. It's not accessible from here without waders or perhaps even a canoe. There probably is some elaborate route to get there but I'd have to contend with some disgruntled cattle on the way and my curiosity has never been so piqued as to try. Besides, I've visited many times from the other side.

I particularly enjoy this point of the walk because of the cacophony of bird sounds. I'm no ornithologist so recognize only the enthusiastic ducks, but there are many others offering a chirpier tone. Occasionally a pair of ducks will streak across the sky - ducks are insanely fast flyers and look like they may be on a kamikaze mission until they gracefully put down with a quack which I'm sure means "and you thought I was going to crash!" Swans are here too, and their young. I recently happened upon one such family at just this spot; they detected my approach and without fuss skilfully slid off into the reeds, graceful and elegant as ever. But none of these wonders are quite so thrilling as that which I witnessed on the night I am describing here.

Lunar Enchantment

Sweeping my gaze to the east to check on the moon's progress I noticed a shape in the sky. Or at least I thought I had, where did it go? My view was partly obscured by a short stretch of small trees, no two the same kind, lining the edge of the trail. I adjusted my stance to allow me to peak through the criss-crossed branches but whenever I secured access to where the shape had been just moments before I saw nothing! Actually not quite nothing, a haze, a shadow – something was moving over there but what was it? I had to know. I walked on a little and peaked through again but the sky was empty except for the steadily strengthening glow of the moon - remarkable in itself but my attention was now focused on finding the spectre. I moved towards the trees, reasoning that if I got close enough I might be able to stick my head through and achieve an unobstructed look. It was impossible, the branches had been too efficiently packed, but the view *was* better than from the middle of the track. There it was again, fast and flowing, like water rushing across the sky. There was only one certain solution – I had to get beyond these trees.

I quickened my pace, I didn't want to miss this phenomenon, whatever it was. I was excited; eager to know; eager to engage with what was taking place up there. It didn't take long to arrive at a clear vantage point and when I got there I realized just how bright the moon was now, and how much it was enlivening the terrain below. The sky was clear and would probably be like this all night, making it possible to move around in the moonlight – a very rare thing for these parts. The brightness further jolted my senses and drew me deeper into this experience. These are the moments that make life so incredible; when our senses heighten as they land upon some external stimuli that we are compelled to explore.

It didn't take long for the answer to emerge. With no barrier between me and the sky to the east, I now had a full view of the spectacle. And not only that, but the performance was being delivered with the backdrop of what was now a huge full moon. I was mesmerized, totally transfixed on the aerial display before me. I looked to the north, not a soul; to the south, no-one – what had I done to deserve this private performance! The air was perfectly still with only a hint of melodic background birdsong. It was still warm. In fact, it seemed to have grown warmer, adding to the magic that permeated the ether. I took a sip of water from my canteen and removed my rucksack – I was going to be here for a while.

Collective consciousness, I believe, is how such events are described – a group of clearly separate individuals seemingly behaving as one. The Olympics has been on TV this week and I caught performances in the synchronized diving, the commentator stressing just how much training had gone into those few seconds of action. This was like that but on a grand scale. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of winged were seemingly dancing through the evening sky as one; every twist, turn, dip and dive timed and executed to perfection. No judge would enter a score for this routine but to my mind it was flawless. How were they doing it? Surely moving at such speed and changing direction so often would lead to at least a few participants being thrown off course! But, from my vantage point at least, that was not the case. Rather, there was complete harmony, perfect co-ordination . . .

The longer I watched the more remarkable it seemed. With my eyes now fully adjusted to the sharp movement against the moonlight, I started to notice other dimensions of the performance – the subtle, but definitely audible, whoosh that accompanied a particular change of direction or that when turned to a specific angle the smallness of these beautiful aerial acrobats was made more obvious; at times they seemed to shrink and then disappear altogether, collectively re-emerging seconds later. The darkening evening sky was pulsing with the energy of each twisting manoeuvre. All other signs of life had vanished – perhaps they too were spectating this extravaganza. Or perhaps my awareness had simply narrowed to a small patch of magical sky.

I turned slowly to survey my surroundings, happiness and wonder probably etched on my face; strangely I felt younger! To the east the scene I have just described continued to play out, southwards, up the track, the darkening sky was making the trees seem denser and like they belonged to a foreign land; the west had grown yellow and pink – warm, welcoming, somehow hopeful; to the north the vista was more open and afforded a view of the collision of the moon's paleness with the few remaining beams of sunlight sneaking round the curvature of the Earth. It was a majestic scene to be immersed in . . . and I was very much immersed, not just a passer-by or spectator. Rather, it was passing through me, a reminder that no human splendour can ever compare to what nature has to offer. Nature reaches inside of us, intoxicating us with its wild magic, twisting our senses, our perception, our place in the world; never the same twice, we are never the same either.

Reflecting on nature; reflecting on humans

Natural magic is disappearing, or so it seems. Science explains away what was once wondrous – our captivation with knowing has supplanted the sublimity of nature. The rhythmic display of dancing birds is nothing more than an expression of their psychology and neural pathways; the awesome full moon no longer reaches gently down towards us, it is simply on its regular and predictable journey through the heavens; my animal body is not excited and enlivened by Earthly contact - remembering a pact it once made with the animate Earth, it simply releases endorphins as a biological trick to make me feel good when I exercise.

If we attend a magic show and the magician starts by revealing the secrets to his trickery would we be interested to stay? Probably not. Although part of us is intrigued to know, we attend to experience *magic*, not reason! When my whole being is transfixed on a group of wingeds contorting their way across the moonlit sky I don't need to know who runs the show or how - I am spellbound and know that I am witnessing something special. Knowledge is not the problem, it's what we choose to do with it. We are at the peak of human knowing, continually using our intellect to advance our understanding. Yet our knowledge has an inverse relationship to ecological well-being. This makes no sense – surely the point of knowing is to do something useful with it; why is the natural world dwindling despite countless volumes of facts and figures about it?

Perhaps *that* is precisely the reason; we've abstracted nature into a set of ostensibly understandable phenomena – nature has, in many cases, become commensurate with facts *about* nature. But we are animals and animality, even for those species with large brains like ours, revolves around interacting with the surrounding Earth. And interacting with the surrounding Earth, having living, breathing, sensory contact with crows, trees and moonbeams is how we come to understand their needs, to respect them as part of the living world of which we are also a part. Nature was once the realm of gods, now it merely fuels our insanity. How do we rediscover the enchantment of the world around us? I do not know . . . but somehow the animal in me does.