TWO LIGHTS

Walking through Landscapes of Loss and Life

JAMES ROBERTS

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CHASING THE DAWN

The dawn begins with seabirds, with the first faint wash of rose-tinted light touching their feathers. There are crested auklets perched on lava flows and sea cliffs. They are here in their millions. The sounds they make, as their milk-pale eyes open, creak and grate, as if overnight the salt winds have penetrated their workings. In among them are tufted puffins, red-legged kittiwakes, short-tailed albatrosses. Their purrs and shrieks begin.

But no, I have the sequence wrong. Before the seabirds felt the first glow of today out on the Bering Sea, already a soft light had touched the peaks of the Koryaksky volcano further east, where a pair of golden eagles sat on a broken crag, their eyes burning amber. A split second before the first auks began their rusting chorus the female fell into the air, spread her wings and pierced the rock with her screams.

There is a line separating day and night that travels continuously around the world. It is a perfect wave of light which triggers a

wave of sound. The line of dawn is also the line of dusk. It crosses Chennai and Moscow at the same time. White-throated kingfishers wake and open their beaks synchronised perfectly with the first calls of great northern divers. Green bee-eaters and jungle babblers time their songs with ptarmigans and Arctic terns.

And already I'm lost, trying to imagine something so complex as a wave of light and sound sliding across a continent. I can't imagine how the dawn penetrates a boreal forest like this one marked on the map, surrounding a place called Zhigansk in the East Siberian taiga. Does the light skim the tops of the trees first and do the birds perched high in their branches start to sing minutes before those lower down, who are still muffled in last night's darkness? Or does one call fire and begin a fusillade of calls, ricocheting through the forest as the light trickles into it in a million places, running down pine needles, leaves and polished bark, the calls of hawk owls, Siberian jays, golden mountain thrushes, rosefinches and red-flanked bluetails? There are other birds whose names I'll never know, more sensitive to the changing light, whose calls are as soft as breath and only carry the length of a branch.

A map is such a crude creation. I'm looking at a double-page spread which contains the whole of Russia and because I've been educated to think that our mark-makings are important I start to think I know something about a place I'll never see, smell, touch or hear. My focus is drawn by a green area on the northern coast, punctuated by hundreds of blue dots, all of them lakes, tiny to my eyes, little pools. But this is a view seen as if from a satellite, miles

above Earth, so each of them must be huge. I wonder how the dawn arrives in a place like this. At home the swifts and cuckoos have returned, last of the migrants. Perhaps some birds are still on their way to Siberia, which is so much further north. The lakes I'm looking at are covered with thawing ice, cracked and splintered like smashed glass, containing a deep translucent blue, the colour of a mind empty of thought, starting to glow beneath the first tendrils of light. Millions of broken mirrors begin to reflect space. In the places where the ice has cleared tundra swans are uncurling their necks from the feathered warmth of their wings. Ross's gulls begin to twitch as the first snow bunting, out on the tundra, calls. A wintry chorus begins, low and mournful, full of loneliness, a beckoning to the birds still on their way, beyond the horizon, and the species long gone, but still present somehow. Frozen in the permafrost are the bodies of extinct birds, found occasionally in the summer thaw, like the perfectly preserved body of a crested lark which was discovered recently, along with the remains of a woolly rhinoceros.

Light is penetrating the lands to the south. People are already awake, tending to animals, preparing for a long day of work. The freezing wind bends the grasses and the thin light arcs along each blade. A citrine wagtail, heading north to Siberia, flicks into life and emits two thin peeps, drowned in the hiss of the wind. Then a call I know well, but don't hear enough, rises out of the distance like a sunset in sound. Eurasian curlews are breeding here. Many other birds familiar to our northerly island are also resident. There are skylarks, buntings, sparrows, magpies and crows, their calls familiar

along a band of Earth stretching five thousand miles. Among them are steppe eagles, saker and Amur falcons, their high-pitched screams scissoring through the chorus.

On the Mongolian steppe a father is breathing heavily, plumes of steam coming from his mouth as he climbs a slope of scree towards a line of quickthorn trees which have just appeared out of the darkness and now hover in front of a rock wall. He reaches the trees and quickly plucks twenty long thorns from their branches. A little further away is a birch that he will cut a piece of bark from with his knife. Beneath the bark he will prise a piece of sapwood and carve it roughly into the shape of a boat. Then he will hurry home with the light turning purple and pink amid the first calls of harlequin ducks and bean geese, which he will ignore as he thinks only about his sick boy whose bed he will sow with the thorns. Just before sunrise he will suspend the boat over the child's head to carry off the sickness.

Frost is melting on the sand dunes of the Gobi Desert. Far to the south the light is coming up fast over tropical beaches fringed with trees. A pink-headed fruit dove has just opened its eyes and uttered a soft, almost inaudible *hoo*, seconds before the low-high pipe of a Javan sunbird. The sea is flat calm out to the horizon. In front of it a temple complex is as still as the cliffs. Then, suddenly, the sound of drums, which makes the bird flee its perch and retreat up the mountain as a line of people, dressed in white shirts and bright sarongs, round the corner of the rock and climb the steep path.

They carry tall flags of every colour and pattern which taper into the sky. They all bear flowers which they scatter as they walk. They cross the rocks and disappear one by one into the water temple, the last of them entering as the first burning line of the sun appears. All the islands of Indonesia are now illuminated. Here the chorus is short and loud, a brass band of birds with beaks as spectacular as their feathers. In the trees there are hornbills and barbets, flowerpeckers and honeyeaters, on the water pelicans, darters, stone-curlews, stilts.

The band of light is speeding. It pours from Jakarta to Medan in minutes and is already crossing the Bay of Bengal. Soon Kolkata, Chennai and Colombo will roar into life. The band has already passed over several mega-cities, places permanently illuminated, where songbirds call all night and the dawn chorus is drowned in machine noise. Even when the sun has risen above the horizon, no one sees until it is overhead, staring down like a blind eye. Most of the birds here are silent. Their corpses are being shipped, crammed into boxes, between abattoirs, warehouses and markets. In the fume-scented parks songbirds are singing in remembrance of the green places that still lie beneath the roads and pavements, the piped rivers and buried streams.

An hour ago the human ripple began with fishermen talking in low voices as they put out their nets. Now their song has gathered into a million waves. Small children are chattering to their toys while parents drink tea and whisper about bad dreams that are only just starting to fade. Sons and daughters are listening to the last words of dying parents while nurses softly mutter instructions

to each other. Lovers are quarrelling or moaning with joy. Farmers and herdsmen are talking to their animals. Street cleaners and night workers, coming home, stop to exchange words about the cold, about their aches and pains. Old people are rocking with sorrow, staring out of windows at landscapes they no longer recognise. Athletes are motivating themselves with words that somehow pour energy into their aching muscles. Field workers and factory workers are cursing the way their lives took a bad turn and swearing that things will be different, or that things will never change. Torturers are dismissing their acts of the previous day. Singers are clearing their throats, expanding their airways, tuning up. Some songs are being sung for the first time, some for the last. Words from old languages are being uttered before going extinct. Most of the voices in most of the places are coming out of screens, listened to by a billion starers. A few people, not nearly enough, are sitting quietly, listening to birds.

There are huge areas, the size of countries, where the light has washed in in silence. The continent-crossing forests that once teemed with multiple symphonies of birds are now islands with ever-withdrawing coastlines. They are surrounded by ordered seas of farmland or encroached on by green deserts. Dawn spreads quickly in these places, a uniform line of light that shows a single wash of colour, hand-chosen by us. Every time the wave of light crosses Earth, more of the wild has been lost. Dawn diffuses in plumes of smoke rising from forest fires, gets mirrored back into the sky off polished metal and glass, pale concrete. The edge of the rising sun glints off masts, wires and turbines where there were

trees only weeks before. It is seen high above Earth, long before it touches the ground, by people in planes staring from windows at the curvature of Earth while they travel between identical places.

The dawn calls that were once a choir of voices endlessly building now follow multiple and thinning threads, some of them broken. The sound passes along the edges of rivers and streams, down steep ravines, across scrubby plains, over sheer ridges where trees cling to shelves of rock, across bog and marsh, disused railway lines, city parks and corridors, along the edges of multilane highways and over green bridges. Calls diffuse and concentrate. A taper of corvid cries travels along a wire for a hundred miles then runs into a pool of life, opening into a multitude of song where the old concentrations of life still hold. This pool is a zoo.

*

I wake in the dark, sit up and light a small lamp. Its reach is limited. In a big room you can almost see the globe it makes, how the light curves back into the dark. There was a year in my life when I had no access to electricity and my night-time light came from this lamp. Once I crossed a field in the early hours, holding it up, and almost walked into a hippopotamus. Only the reflected glint in the corner of the creature's eye warned me it was there.

The universe is a place of permanent night lit by lanterns like mine, globes of light illuminating the surfaces of other globes as they spin and oscillate. On Mercury the dawn lasts a full Earth day and never reaches its poles at any time of the solar year. The time

between one sunrise and the next is 176 days. On Venus there are only two dawns in the whole of its solar year. Jupiter rotates so fast that its storm-wracked dawns occur 10,476 times each year. The poles of Uranus point directly at the sun giving each of them forty-two years of day, forty-two years of night and a single, long, freezing dawn in between. Due to its gaseous composition and speed of rotation, days on Uranus are twisted out of shape. At the poles they last twelve hours, at the equator eighteen. If eyes were on its surface to witness, the dawn would be shrouded in clouds being hurled across its skies at supersonic speeds.

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The light has reached the great barrier of the Alps and is touching the ice of its highest peaks, which are starting to glow. Alpine swifts have been on the wing all night and remain silent until the sun is up, which they will see first of all creatures. A chough nods and grates its first call. Light is crossing the peak of Hochtor, and Zirbitzkogel, minutes later Birkkarspitze and Wildspitze, bringing salutations from rock ptarmigans and black grouses. It touches the knife-edge peak of Finsteraarhorn, then on to Täschhorn, Dom and Monte Rosa amid the cries of bearded vultures. It touches Pic de Rochebrune, Arcalod, Mont Blanc. It has taken 50 minutes to cross the 750 miles of the Alps from east to west. It travels across the lowlands of France, silhouetting the shapes of empty castles and ruins where doves shelter in alcoves. It travels down motorways and picks out the rectangles of warehouses, floods thousands of acres

of monocrops. It touches the spires of old cathedrals kindling the blazing cries of peregrine falcons. It weaves into dense woodlands and forests, silencing owls and nightjars and beckoning forth the tick-tick songs of wrens. It picks out the wings of wind turbines and the feathered corpses that lie on the ground beneath them. It crosses Picardy and Normandy and finally touches the sea again. Black-backed gulls and herring gulls are raucous.

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Finally, it reaches my island home and fifteen minutes later I am up, fog-eyed, preparing tea. I walk into the garden, shivering a little. It is 4 a.m. I am facing east. Above me the last stars are fading out of an indigo sky. On the horizon is a band of burnt orange, graduating to turquoise. Strands of cloud hang like tail feathers. A bat is circling the house and on its second lap it comes so low over my head that my cheeks feel the air its wings displace. Still silence. Then the first bird calls, a blackbird perched in my neighbour's ash tree. Then another blackbird calling back from a stand of oaks. A pheasant croaks in the field and a robin starts piping, a thin chorus of four still so quiet I can hear the bat's wingbeats. For minutes it continues like this while the light changes colour and the field edges come into view across the valley. A crow calls, and another. A pigeon coos softly. Then the finches and tits start to sing. A wren, a jay. The blackbird has hopped from the tree on to my neighbour's roof and now it is singing loud. My foggy mind is trying to detect its patterns and repetitions but a blackbird's song has endless variations. The

air is changing, a sudden plume of cold, a whisper of wind and on it more birdsong carries, further off, from the trees and hedges, the old millpond, the river. The rooks are awake. Only a couple, calling to each other nearby. Then four rise into the sky. They swerve, turn and land again. It wakes the rookery down in the valley and now all I can hear are rooks, perhaps two hundred of them, like a brass section out of tune with the rest of the orchestra. An orange curtain rises for the day to begin. The stars have vanished. The world is a theatre of birdsong.

We live on the side of a high ridge that runs from the Herefordshire border into Wales. It overlooks the Black Mountains to the south and the Cambrian Mountains to the north. To the west are the peaks of the Brecon Beacons. They're all green peaks, flat-topped with fingered ridges. Between the ridges are deeply carved valleys threaded with rivers and streams. Scattered along the valleys are hamlets and villages, little towns. Narrow lanes spider away from them, up steep slopes to the small farms which have been here for many generations. Apart from in the valley bottoms, where the climate is warmer and the soil more fertile, this landscape is dominated by sheep and cattle farming. The towns each have their livestock market, social hubs for the scattered population. The surrounding hilltops are mostly common land, dominated by bracken, bilberry and heather, perfect habitats for ground-nesting birds.

It was perhaps a search for natural richness that led my family to this place. We moved when our first son was a few months

old, thinking that we might be able to give him a *Swallows and Amazons* childhood. The uplands are huge, open spaces. From the summits of the hills the views are spectacular. The light play, on the many days of rain and broken cloud, is mesmerising, the topography sculpted with creases and folds, crests and waves. It's a brooding landscape which inspires the imagination. These hills are storied, mythical places, scattered with old earthworks, sunken lanes, standing stones, cairns and barrows. The skies are filled with circling buzzards and red kites.

I was in my mid-twenties before I encountered a landscape that teemed with wildlife. I was brought up in the suburbs of Stoke-on-Trent, in a house that overlooked the winding gear of the local coal mine. It was a city made up of huge constellations of identical housing estates spread around a still-functioning industrial centre dominated by coal and clay. I only have three memories about the wildlife in that place. I remember the bodies of dead hedgehogs that began to appear in the playing field across the road from our house one year, so many of them that we kids created a hedgehog graveyard in the boggy ground at the edge of the cricket pitch. I remember a friend at primary school who used to go nesting. He had boxes filled with strangely coloured and patterned eggs, and a shed at the back of his house where he kept a kestrel in a cage. And I remember the tawny owl which sat on the telephone pole at eye level to my bedroom window every night for a whole winter. These memories are burned into me when most of my childhood is now a fading blur. I believe that a fascination with wild creatures exists in

all children. It's a species-deep connection, an unbroken thread that has stayed with us for hundreds of millennia, going back to when we woke at dawn in places which sang with a multitude of voices. It's a connection that most of us now forget as we reach puberty and adulthood.

The first mountain I ever walked up was Great Gable in the Lake District. We hiked it in the worst possible weather, the March wind, snow and sleet battering us all the way to the summit, which we had to crawl to. We were working-class city kids with no experience and no equipment. I remember scrambling up a slope of scree near the summit. When we got over the ledge at the top there were sheep peering down at us, disinterested, as if this mountain were no mountain at all. What I remember most is how the place changed as the rain came down, how waterfalls appeared and started foaming into the valleys, how the stream which we were camped next to became a torrent, rising metres in a few hours, washing our tents away. It was freezing cold, dark, dangerous. And beautiful. I'd like to say that this experience led me back to the uplands frequently, but it didn't, though the place left a deep impression on me. The uplands became a question that recurred once in a while, but a decade passed before I went back there. Perhaps I'd intuited that the wildness I'd experienced in that place was also an emptiness, that it sang of loss.

For years after that hike I only spent time in cities, Wolverhampton and Birmingham, then London. I studied design at polytechnic, then worked a job in computer graphics for several years before getting the urge to travel. In my mid-twenties I took a

flight to Tangier and crossed Africa, most of the time spent in the Congo, Uganda and Kenya. It was on a sleeper train from Kampala to Nairobi that I first encountered a truly wild place. I opened the cabin curtains at dawn to see a plain stretching to the horizon, filled with animals. There were zebras and antelopes, circling hawks, troops of baboons, rhinos, serval cats. We passed the huge corpse of a giraffe, its ribs splayed like hands in prayer, cloaked with flies, pecked at by white-backed vultures. In the distance the parched grasses were pooled with dark, shifting blurs, herds of wildebeest on the move. Between the herds there were grazing cattle watched over by red-clad tribesmen. That scene became an ideal for me, a community that encompassed and stretched beyond the human village, humming with life.

I don't know when my thoughts began to be shaped by birds. Once I rescued a stranded blackbird chick, housed it in a shoe box in the side porch of my parents' house and fed it bread and milk for three days. When I went to it on the fourth day it was tipped forwards into its feeding bowl, its head bent to the side, its eyes shut. When it was alive it gawped and pecked at me. When it was dead I stroked its downy lizard body, its bony beak.

Forty years later I tried to rescue a rook chick which possibly didn't need my help. It had attempted to fly from the nest too early and was sitting in the lane, screeching to its parents, which, as far as I could tell, were not responding. I took it back to the house, found a shoe box and was about to repeat the mistake I'd made as a child before my wife Julia told me I needed to put the bird outside,

as close to the nest as possible, so that its parents could find it. I followed that advice and in three days found its dead body draped in a hedge. The wild is always out of reach.

I've never been overly interested in the science of birds, in the machinery of them, and I have a stack of unread books to prove it. I'm not much of a birdwatcher and I can't identify many of the rarer species even after years of trying. I'm an artist and what I love about birds is their artistry, the shapes they make with the light, their music, their constant transformations. Today a buzzard floated over my head so low I could almost touch it. I saw every bar on its feathers, its amber eye, its sickle talons. I froze for a second, watched it pass, tried to hold on to its form so I could draw it later. But it slipped away. Tonight it could die in the storm that is blowing in. Or it could pair and breed in the woods that overlook my house, watching me from a distance all summer.

Behind our house, only a few metres from the bedroom wall, is a huge copper beech tree. Its branches are draped over our heads, its roots splayed under our feet. In spring it's an all-day sunset, filled with birds. A rookery is slowly being built in the tree, only four nests at the moment. All day I can hear the rooks' calls, their footsteps and beak taps on the roof only centimetres from my head. At night they are silent except for the occasional cackle and squawk, a response, perhaps, to something experienced in a corvid dream. I'm not sure how long it takes for a rookery to become established, but I'm hoping soon for a winter dusk where hundreds of them shoal above my head, shrieking and sparring,

flipping upside down, bringing the space above the house into ecstatic life.

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Most artists are obsessed with space. Positive space is the area of a picture which contains the subject, the details, the face or figure in a portrait, the arranged objects in a still life, the trees and rocks in a landscape. Negative space is the area of the picture which surrounds the subject. My favourite paintings are by masters of both. I've spent hours staring at Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, wondering how he managed to achieve the milky light in the room, the sense of silence, the open-mouthed expression on the pregnant woman's face and the depths behind it. Patrick Heron achieved something similar in his abstract painting *Blue Painting – Venetian Disc and Black Column*, a picture which sings colour, which your eyes can dance with. In recent years I've become fascinated with ancient Chinese mountain landscape paintings and the poems which often accompany them. These are masterworks of negative space, the artists coming from a philosophical tradition which recognised and celebrated the emptiness from which all things emanate. Mountains appear from the mist, then disappear back into it, the way all of the ten thousand things do.

In the uplands the landscape and its inhabitants dissolve frequently. Negative space dominates. This phenomenon has become the inspiration for my visual imagination. I paint the silhouettes of distant mountains, the outlines of cliffs squalled

featureless by rain, birds in flight. When I draw I use ink, salt and water, the simplest method I can find. With one drop of ink, one of water and a few grains of salt you can create an image which reflects the fluidity of life. The salt interacts to create unpredictable textures, like threads of water across sand, like phosphorescent sparks, like storm clouds. It's the unpredictability that I love and the speed with which the shapes and textures materialise, as if by themselves. Occasionally an image emerges which has some of the life of the place or bird, some of its movement, its fleetingness. The best images seem to be appearing and disappearing simultaneously, the way an owl does, caught briefly in the light from a window, or a goshawk in the daytime dusk beneath the canopy of a wood.

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Twilight is the time of day I love most. Forms dissolve, accompanied by the slow quieting of the earth. The land shape-shifts. There is an out breath, particularly in places like this where most living things are inhabitants of the light. Dusk is the best time to be in the uplands. It allows you to come to your senses. There's a joy in watching a well-known track disappear ahead of you, for the outlines in the land to fade back and transform. I follow the tracks made by animal footprints across the hill, which are sometimes distinct, deep furrows trampled through high bracken; and sometimes faint, just a slight indentation in the moss. At dusk they slowly blend with the terrain as if a comb has smoothed them out. In the valley below the hedges begin to erase, the scissored

lines of the fields blur, barns and farmhouses sink into the dark. The trees seem to hold their forms longest, bleeding an inky stain which lingers into night. There's a hypnotising quality to this transformation. In some of the bleakest times of my life I've gone to the hills at dusk just so I can breathe, walking to an out-of-the-way spot overlooking the valley and mountains beyond. There I can find the place inside me that watches, that point of attention beyond the tangled ruminations, observing the transience of things. As the place fades back to its essence, shedding the scars, so do I.

At dusk the hills become pure source, their silhouettes starting points for flares of life. Trees at the edge of a pool are the beginnings of a forest stretching all the way to the sea. The peaks of the whaleback mountains are foothills beyond which towers of ice-covered rock climb. Across the moor the wolves are hunting. I sit with my back to the trunk of an oak where an eagle owl perches, staring down with orange eyes. Earth imagines continually, sculpts new forms, erases them, sculpts again. This is the cycle inside which all other cycles turn.

Twilight is the simplest of phenomena, yet the transformation it brings about reveals life at its most complex, different in every place, at every time. The line of dawn passes over almost nine million eukaryotic species each day, 80 per cent of them we have yet to discover, and has passed over billions more which are now extinct. At dusk a wave of fish and invertebrates rise from the depths of the oceans in such densities that they shut out the last of the solar light,

replacing it with their own luminescence as they hunt and try to conceal themselves from hunters. In many places, however, silences, and not songs, are more often audible.

There was once a temperate rainforest here, covering most of these hills. It was removed and replaced by a farming system which provided habitat for a hugely reduced number of species, but the uplands still thrummed with life. Now industrial agriculture has taken over, part of the great acceleration. Only small areas remain which still contain their original riches, the places we've abandoned or find too inconvenient to farm or fish: steep ravines and little commons filled with trees; estuaries and wetlands which are still home to large populations of waders and wintering geese; offshore islands where abandoned fields are burrowed by nesting seabirds. These are the places I love most, the landscapes of life. Over the years they've tuned me into the wild, recreated the bond that we all feel ultimately.

Wherever I go I try to find the hidden places where wild creatures gather. Yesterday I drove to a valley I'd never been to before to see a little wild river winding out of the high hills. When I got out of the car the place was silent except for the tumbling of the water. An hour later I still hadn't seen or heard a bird. I moved on, followed the mountain road to the sea and then turned north, where I stopped again at a miles-long beach bordering an estuary. There, in front of the dunes and an ancient drowned forest, I sat and watched a hundred sandpipers feeding at the edge of the tide, rushing forwards and backwards with the sliding water, spooking to rise in an echelon, out over the dunes. It was worth the journey.

In the uplands places rich with life can be hard to find, but they're there if you know where to look.

There's a bare place on the hill where a stream has cut its way east down a steep slope into a flooded area of sedge and star moss. It's a roosting site for golden plovers from October to April. They gather there in little groups through the autumn until the flock has grown to around two hundred birds. The plovers are so still, so silent and well camouflaged on the ground that a walker can be almost in the middle of them before spotting them. I've happened on the flock many times in shifting mist, at first noticing only that the ground in front of me seems to be quivering, then sliding, the birds moving away from me in a wave, before a single call sounds the alarm and the birds rise in a rush. They flee over the other side of the ridge for a moment, then return and circle overhead, sometimes high up, at other times almost skimming the ground. As they change direction they flash silver-white, the flock moving as a single, convulsing organism. The dead zone of the hill comes back to life. The weight in me lessens. I'm light as a bird. I can fly.