

FIELD NOTES FROM
A HIDDEN CITY

Esther Woolfson

GRANTA

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In memory of my father, and of a great musician,
my cousin Eric Woolfson (1945–2009)

... we would assume that what it is we meant

would have been listed in some book set down
beyond the sky's far reaches, if at all
there was some purpose here. But now I think
the purpose lives in us all and that we fall

into an error if we do not keep
our own true notebook of the way we came,
how the sleet stung, or how a wandering bird
cried at the window ...

Loren Eiseley

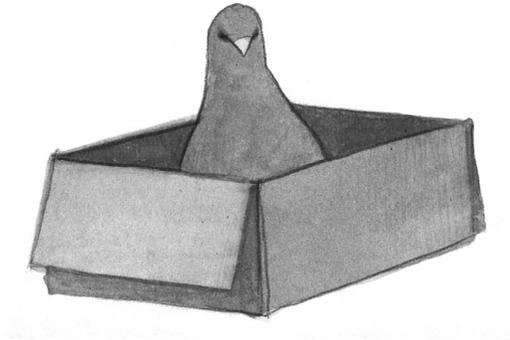
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INTRODUCTION



It was almost four in the afternoon on one of the oddly quiet days of December. Snow had fallen again, yet another layer to freeze onto the iron-hard strata of thick, packed ice. In less than a month, the city had been turned into a fortress of ice and stone. It was already dark as I walked past the church at the end of the lane. A line of bright lights from house windows seemed to catch at the sparkle in the air. Every afternoon towards dusk, the cold became visible; it fell in a fine mist of ice particles which stung in the throat. By the time it was dark, it had glazed every surface to an even glitter.

Christmas soon, and a year ending. The year had been one of superlatives – the lowest recorded temperatures, the heaviest snow, the wettest summer; in matters economic as well as meteorological, of no less magnitude and equally unassailable. It seemed a year designed to test every certainty, to bring the stirrings of disquiet, to make you wonder what might be next and when.

Illuminated by a streetlight, something in the lane moved in the snow, a frantic patch of thrashing darkness, a flail and panic of blue and grey. Whatever it was, I ran clumsily towards it, impeded by paddings of clothes, socks and boots. It was a bird, almost submerged, drowning in snow. I scooped it up from the drift in both hands; a young pigeon, still small with the pink, moist-looking beak of a recent fledgling. He was feathered but his feathers were drenched and he carried one wing awkwardly. There were no other birds around. It was past

roosting time, too late and too cold for them. I folded the wing carefully against the bird's body and held him. I'd been about to go to the corner shop but suspected he wouldn't be welcome there. There was nothing I could do but carry him home, beyond immediate danger. It was only as I've done with generations of the avian needy before him.

As we walked, the bird peered from between my hands, a feral pigeon, a blue rock pigeon, *Columba livia*: future street-dweller, serial pavement-picker, underfoot obstacle, as familiar and ubiquitous as ourselves, one of the latest generation of the birds who resolutely populate the cities of the world, a parallel presence to our own, knowing, able, urban survivors, accepted and decried in varying measures. I could feel his fast, panicky heartbeat, even through thick gloves.

At home, I wrapped the bird in a towel to dry him, carrying him swaddled under my arm as I lined a box with newspaper. When he was dry, I put him in and he settled immediately. I put the box in the vestibule, where it was just warm enough – the bird had his full plumage, and now that he was dry, he'd be able to keep himself warm. Later, I'd think about all the possible problems of raising him but first I had to go and finish my shopping.

Walking back down the lane, past garden walls tessellated by blown snow, I realised that the bird's parents must have been roosting among the stone buttresses of the church near to where I found him. Pigeons breed at unlikely times although that moment seemed even less judicious than most. I wondered how he'd come to be there – fallen, pushed, lost. With birds, you never really know.

On my way back home again, I stopped a moment. The place where

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he'd been struggling was now a patch of compacted snow, ridged and imprinted with the broad zigzag indentations that must have been made by the tyres of the Range Rover that had driven slowly past us in the lane as we walked home together.

Over the next few days, the bird stayed contentedly enough in his box. I would wait until the wing was fully healed and then let him go, return him to the wild.

As I fed and took care of the bird, I began to think more about the expression 'return to the wild', the words we use to describe setting a creature free to return to its own environment, to live its life among its own, a natural life. The wild in this case would most probably be the large sandstone church at the end of the lane, a neo-Gothic building of step-corbelling and intricate stone finials, around whose tall central spire crows and magpies engage in glorious aerial combat on windy days. It would be the roofs and gardens of this district, the handsome Victorian villas, long-established trees and wide, quiet streets only a short walk from the centre of the city. Hardly wild.

For all that, this was a wild bird – a wild, city bird although the words 'wild' and 'city' seemed difficult to reconcile. I began to think about wildness in relation to creatures who live in cities, about whether or not we consider them less wild than creatures living elsewhere, or think of them as somehow a lesser part of nature itself. I wondered if the same might apply to humans, as if merely by being in a city, not only might our lungs be polluted but ourselves, our minds (and if we have them, souls), as if urban dwellers must by definition be over-avid consumers of the unnecessary, weakened by purchase, alienated in

every way, distanced from a lost, admonitory Eden. Are we, I wondered, living lives remote from all that is natural, beneficial, wild, or are we as much a part of the natural ordering of the universe as the wildest of things, moved by the same forces, as wild as anything else on earth? It seemed to me that if I'm representative of my species, the bird was representative of many more, of all the other birds, beasts and smaller life forms, seen and unseen, who populate our cities, who make their lives among us – and were often there before us – adapting to our habits, sharing with us the triumphs or follies of our building policies, our tendencies to destroy and pollute or to engage in the ecologically catastrophic. Their presence may be the only contact many urban people have with the natural world but our relationship with them seems changed by proximity, diminished by the very fact of their being here among us. As I'd passed the compacted snow where I'd picked up the bird, I had begun to think of the value of any creature's life and of the ways in which we make judgements or calculate worth, of the complex gradations we apply to other species, the ones we use to approve or to condemn.

I passed the bird on the way in and out of the house, checking on him often to make sure that he was eating and roosting. In the mornings, I went downstairs with the usual trepidation, the kind you always have when you're looking after a rescued bird when you wonder if some unknown disease or frailty has ended its life in the night. But every morning he was there, alive.

A wild bird but an ordinary one. I looked up the definition of 'ordinary' – *With no special or distinctive features, common, of ordinary rank,*

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undistinguished, commonplace. Which of us is any more or less? Whatever he was, this bird was beautiful. His new, fresh feathers were lavender and navy, shading to a fine line of black towards the tips of his wings, his eyes bright and watching.

In that dark and quiet city lane as we'd walked past the backs of offices and car parks, empty and deserted on that late Saturday afternoon, the bird had seemed symbolic of something, although I wasn't sure what. It may have been the season, the approach of Christmas, which made me think of things abandoned and needy. Or perhaps it was just the depictions of doves which are, after all, pigeons by another name, in attitudes of unlikely spiritual bliss that were everywhere on cards and decorations. It may have been the winter, the worst many people had ever experienced which, in its startling and prolonged severity, had brought an atmosphere of strangeness, a feeling of closing in and uncertainty, that had encouraged me to feel reflective. This creature seemed to symbolise the fragility that suddenly I felt was there, at the heart of everything.

The fierce and early cold had already made me hyper-aware of our place on the surface of the earth, forcing on me a new kind of realisation about the effects of weather, the ways in which we all live with it in precarious dependence. And now the bird was making me look differently at the life of the city. As I watched him, I wondered what we were doing here together. How had we come to be in this place, at this moment? What circumstances had brought us to this city? What allowed and even encouraged me to pick up this member of another species? What was it that made me care? What made him accept my

human attentions without fear or panic? Any relationship between us, our individual lives and fortunes too, felt both momentous and quotidian, the way most of life turns out to be. Together, in spite of our obvious differences, we were as bound as any two creatures on earth by something only too measurable – life itself. Living in a city, we are all elements of a biological and ecological chain described by words that express the complex web of connection between us and hint of dependency and need – *commensal, mutual, symbiotic, predatory, synanthropic*. Our streets, buildings, houses are shared, our gardens and our trees. In one city, there are more cities than we know, hidden cities inhabited by those with whom we share everything we rely on: food and light and air. In differing degrees, we share our vulnerability to the elements that shape and dominate our lives: cold or heat, wind and rain. If it was true of this bird, it's true of everything else that lives in any city; any creature, the ones too we bring into our lives by choice.

During the first snow, the quality of those strange, cold days seemed to require something of me. It was the necessity to record, to keep an impression of the time in some small way, a way beyond forgetting. Finding the bird only concentrated the feeling, and I knew that if I should document our lives and time and place, I should do it now. As the bird watched me intently from his box, it felt as if it was the least that I might do.

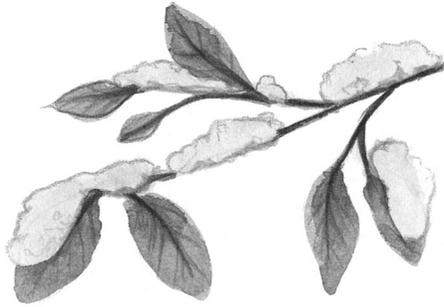
Over the days, the damaged wing improved. The bird grew bolder, stood on the edge of his box, became impatient. He must have flown because one morning, I had to pick him out of the leaves of the plants on the recessed windowsill, then from the high ledge above the door.

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I hoped that he would be ready to release before Christmas. My family would be coming home, and there'd be enough to do. I'd have to decide when to let him go and hoped that his strong homing sense, that powerful, complex set of navigational tools pigeons have, would be intact. But could he navigate in snow? Was he old enough to find his way?

On a morning a few days before Christmas, I opened the door to see how much more snow had to be shovelled from the front path. It was only a little open but it was enough. The bird flew swiftly onto the top of the door, removing from me any need for decision. Quickly he was off, seeming to turn right although I couldn't be quite sure if it was really him I saw in the early-morning light, heading towards the lane, towards the church, out into the wild and snowy city.

SNOW



November 24th

The first snow of winter begins to fall in the afternoon, while it's still light. It lies at once although it's too early for it. Usually, the first thin flurries of the season fall quickly then melt away but today, it is a chill more intense than most November cold. Dark before four, and still snowing. Light is short now – at the Winter Solstice, less than a month away, there'll be only six hours and forty minutes of light from dawn until dusk. The light clicks away from the Summer Solstice to the Winter, minute by minute into darkness, and then slowly back again to light. By early evening, the snow is already thick enough to muffle the sound of rush-hour traffic.

Last winter seems only recently over. Its snow didn't melt fully until late April and it snowed again in June. Even when it began to thaw, the process seemed endless, slicks of glazed white clinging for weeks to the foot of north walls and filling hollow dents under trees. With it, there seemed to be a gradual sense of recovery as if we all had to cast off the shadow of cold before we could move into the brightness of spring and summer, a brightness that never came. Quick blusters of flying flakes belaboured the days of May, melting before they lay. Like an echo of snow, crack-shots of hail blew in volleys against glass and slate in June. Cold winds tore down branches and scattered the ground with fallen petals of rose and rhododendron. During July and August, the granite

from which this city is built was dark with water. Even in good years, days of summer sun are scarce – any of the hedonistic impulses you might feel if you lived in a more encouraging climate ebb away with the season and dissolve into chill. (How fortunate we are – we need have no regrets at the ending of hot and glorious summers.) The year's snow and rain foreshortened time, seemed to press it into less of a measure than it should take, into an altered, flattened dimension. The seasons themselves felt bent into unrecognisable shapes, lopped or stretched, lasting only days, flaring then dying back. The transition from what might have been spring and then summer into what might have been autumn was imperceptible – the name of the month, from rain to rain.

For a while, I thought I was the only one to feel disorientated by this disjunction of seasons and time but other people were too. Friends reported feeling Novemberish in July, expectant but disappointed by the time summer came, as if spring hadn't yet been. Our progress through the months seemed to have happened in a muted circle, unrelated to anywhere else. Other European cities with burning summer temperatures might have been in a different zone of time, on an entirely different continent. We had six months, more or less, of snow.

There was even more discussion than there usually is of weather and natural phenomena, of what might be concluded from one year's measuring, of what's measurable and what's not. The weather and our discussion felt unprecedented, as if both were just part of an infinitely larger picture, one whose totality we couldn't yet see. In the months between the snow, there had been ash clouds and rain; in other places, extreme heat and earthquakes, oil spills and drastic flooding. And now

this new snow, which feels unexpectedly like a completion, the closing of a circle.

During the year I had a desire to travel, but now it has disappeared completely, almost as if it has dissolved under the weight of snow. I hadn't been anywhere for a long time – anywhere far away – and it made me feel restless. I began to plan and to think about where I wanted to go. It was only a modest, unambitious plan that would have taken me to one of the European cities for a few days, but even that kept being overturned by one thing or another, first by the weather and then work and after that, airline crises. I put it into abeyance and almost forgot about it but now, I remember it again. The restlessness has vanished and I'm delighted not to have to consider being anywhere else at all. (It's just as well because the trains have stopped and the airport is closed and all but the main roads are impassable.) It's a world in miniature. The only way I have to understand it is within a different set of coordinates, to see it in close-up, to know what's near.

November 25th

The second morning, and already it seems like time marked out and possibly named: The Snow. I have to drive a little way out of town on as yet ungritted roads for a gathering of friends who don't see each other often but instead of ten, we're three. Most of the others sensibly won't drive in this weather from Perthshire and Angus. We sit in a large conservatory and talk about work and books and watch more snow fall.

Although there's no reason yet to think it, the others too feel that this is just the beginning. We discuss stocking up, preparing.

On the way home, I stop to buy some of the things I might not be able to carry easily if this weather carries on: kindling and logs, bags of flour, wheat and rye and spelt, as if I'm preparing for a Russian winter.

When we came here first over twenty years ago, the weather was different, in memory at least. I was familiar with the west of Scotland, with relentless rain, seasons of rain, rain-lashed autumns and winters. For me, east-coast weather meant the ferocious winds of Edinburgh. By comparison, the north-east seemed chill and bright and dry, its snow measured, limited to a few days in the first months of the year and then over. The first January we were here, I bought new sunglasses against the glare of low winter sun.

(I take into account the nature of perception and the unreliability of memory. I know the retrospective, nostalgic tricks the mind uses in observation of the past. Have there really been more storms, more rain, unexpectedly intense moments of heat, followed by quick reverses into cold?)

November 27th

A few days now, and the snowfall has settled into a pattern. Every day, shifting, vertical blinds of moving grey and white drop from pale violet or charcoal skies. Each fall hardens to glittering ice in the freezing, crystalline air of night and then every morning, more snow falls. Even

though it has only been for a short time now, I begin to remember how prolonged snow and darkness make life seem small. Already, everything seems to have shrunk to the possible or just the necessary. The cold seems to seal us all in. I can't decide if we're cocooned within the city, in our houses, or isolated inside ourselves. Any of these seems fine to me. These days of winter are brief and freezing and often brilliant and then, all the rooms are filled fleetingly with a pure white light.

Cold and darkness alter everything; they change the pattern of days and nights, make me question what is necessary. Towards nightfall, a preternatural quiet falls with the temperature. Opening the front door at nine in the evening, it's to a kind of silence. It's a city silence, weighty and unnerving, all sudden, unexpected absence. If even a single car grinds slowly past, for once it doesn't seem unreasonable or nosey to wonder why it's out or where it's going.

In the night a few times, I've been wakened by the stillness. Even the gulls are silent. Here, you're often woken by the sounds of gulls. Even when it's nearly morning, in winter darkness, it still feels like night, their cries arching lightly in the air over the silent city. I waken and then as I sleep again, think about the sounds they make which might be of warning or joy, or grief, but which are most probably an unfathomable *Larus* chorus of dialogue and exchange. For me, gulls' voices are a welcome wakening, a kind of wild music, a reminder of where I am in that moment of renewed consciousness: a city on the edge of the sea, at the north-eastern rim of a northern island between the western coasts of Scandinavia and the eastern beginnings of North America, the southern reaches of circumpolar north.

Looking down from a plane window when you're flying towards it from the south, for a long way below you see only rock and grass and fields and suddenly it's there, a tight grey city with sea and water almost surrounding it. It's a city perched on the edge of water, a city of two rivers, blown by every wind named and unnamed, by *ban-gull* and *haugull*, *blinter* and *flist*. There are days in the wind and rain when it feels as though the whole of it, every edifice and structure, every garden, streetlight and tree will detach and set out determinedly to sea. The grey granite from which Aberdeen is built can look only a semitone lighter or darker than the clouds and sky.

We're part of a thin string of cities, a chain of northern places, poised along this numbered scale, the circles of latitude; the last habitation before the real cold begins, on the fringes of subarctic ice and snow, at the northern reaches of an earth circling in an ellipsis around the sun. We're spinning, tilted on an axis pointing between the North Star and the Southern Cross, tilted only 23.5 degrees, just enough to give us seasons and the words for seasons, for changes in the light and darkness, our hours of day and night. Without the tilt, there would be twelve hours of darkness and twelve of light. The sun would rise and set at the same time every day. There would be differences in temperature because of alterations in distance from the sun but no seasons. Tilting, we incline at certain times of year from or towards the sun. At 57 degrees of latitude, our winter days are short, our summer ones long.

In these northern coastal cities of stone or wood or steel, there's no forgetting the weather or the sea. Sea is in the air, in the mist, in the haar that rolls in fine wet clouds from the coast, up through the har-

bour, rolling like smoke over the streets and through the lanes. It wreathes round spires, infiltrates the city even on days when inland the sun is warm in a perfect sky. The sea is our orientation, our vanishing point, like the fluid in a spirit level.

It's more than twenty years since I came here to live. I was born a few years after the end of the war in Glasgow, a big city, bleak and blackened then, its porous sandstone walls stained by coal and industry and war. It felt perpetually dark, blighted by eerily quiet, yellow, lung-destroying fogs, and still marked everywhere by the evidence of bombing. On our morning journeys from the suburb where we lived to our school in the middle of the city, we passed a sheared-off tenement wall where, three storeys up, a fireplace hung frozen in some unimaginable moment like an incidental memorial, condemned to face a horizon once red with the fires of bombed and burning Clydeside. The city is clean and changed now, scrubbed bright and golden, entangled with new roads and flyovers. But when I visit, I know the past is still underlying the present as it always is, an indelible imprint of darkness.

On the day in May when I came to look for a house, I had never been to Aberdeen before. From the first, it seemed a city unlike any other, even the other Scottish ones, unlike Glasgow or beautiful, gracious Edinburgh where I lived for years. I remember walking out of the station into a maritime place. It felt Baltic, Hanseatic. I walked out to a harbour, to the sound of gulls, the air blowing with what seemed to me to be the scent of fish and water. The stone was austere and grey, utterly unlike the soft and muted sandstone of those other cities. The broad city-centre streets, the strikingly plain Georgian terraces and

early-Victorian cottages were different too, buildings with curved stone gables and oriel windows. I wandered through the network of back lanes behind the city centre with a sense of surprise as if, by some magical mingling of history and infantile solipsism, only my presence had called all this into being.

Geography makes this city easy to overlook, even for Scots, a hundred miles north of Edinburgh and Glasgow, 550 miles from London. (A city more than five hundred miles from London! Is such a thing possible?) It's a place you come to with a purpose. You come to find oil or a house or to sail on a ferry to the Northern Isles.

Shortly before we moved here, I told a friend in London, an Arabic speaker, that we were moving.

'To where?'

'Aberdeen.'

'Ab-ed-din!' he said, delighted. 'This is an Arabic name!'

Aberdeen's small. It's utterly unlike the numerical, geographic giants, the urban behemoths that take a day or more to cross. The very word 'city' itself seems too big for us – cities, surely, should be other than we are. They should be vast and loud. They should spread far beyond the margins of sight. They should be populous, somnambulistic, eternal. Even the words we use of cities seem too weighty for us: *metropolis*, *megalopolis*, *conurbation*, *suburb*, *exurb*. Aberdeen has none of the sense of frantic wakefulness of other cities, the restless,

impatient feeling you have that, whatever the hour, something's happening somewhere.

I get an email from a friend: 'I've just been in Mexico City. It's got a population of 25 million, or something like that . . .'

That's 115 times the population of this city. I calculate and make comparisons. How many houses and acres and roads would there have to be? In a moment, I've expanded us. I've spread us a hundredfold, more, over the surface of the earth. I build to accommodate an imaginary populace. The city approaches the Cairngorms forty miles away. It encroaches far out along the banks of both rivers; houses, streets, office blocks fill the valleys of the Dee and the Don. In my imaginary city, you can no longer see from the top windows of my house straight down the city to the horizon and the sea.

'It's amazing', my friend writes, 'how you stop noticing the pollution after twenty-four hours.'

Here, the sea winds blow away at least some of the exhaust fumes. Where they can, they swiftly carry away the accumulations of this city's passionate, unflagging devotion to the car. Here, we live with sound and weather, with wind or rain or the silence of snow. The air can be crystalline but equally it can be pinched and mean until it feels as if we're trying to summon light by looking at a day through dusty lenses. The light here makes the sky seem wide and high. Everything that surrounds us is subtle. Ours is a quiet landscape, a quiet ecology, muted and northern; our bleaching is sea and wind done, sand-worn, impermeable, cold. Brightness blazes round other latitudes, southerly ones, with colour and heat and light but we, like birds with the finest

discernments in their many-coned and rodded retinas, habituate our sight to shades and motes of dun and fawn and grey, all fading and understatement. This city is made in every register of grey. Sometimes when sun strikes stone, the mica in the granite casts a million points of dazzle, turning it to a city sprinkled with light.

I found a house that day in May many years ago, and my family – David and our daughters, Bec and Han – lived in it for a while and then we moved away, first to Edinburgh and then to London, and after a few years, we came back again. We found another house, the one that's still home after more than twenty years.

November 28th

At first light the cold seems even fiercer and more implacable than before. I have to smash thick slabs of ice from the doves' and outside birds' water dishes. After I've refilled all the feeders, I search the garden to see who has walked over the snow but the surface is so crisp and hard, there's very little evidence, only the remnants of seed cases and bird food scattered on the ground. The only avian footprints, faint dents and shadows, are wood pigeons', the only birds heavy enough to leave a trace. This morning, I saw a single line of cat prints, which stopped abruptly as if the unfortunate creature had been snatched suddenly, shockingly into the air by hand or beak unknown. Snow must have fallen after it passed by and drifting has obscured the rest of its tracks.

I decide not to use the car at all – I don't use it very much even in

SNOW

fine weather, and the effort of digging it out from the banks of snow piling in the road and gutters is far greater than the effort of walking. I hate driving on snow and ice, all the crunching, the heart-stopping skidding, the sudden slides and sideways drifting. The pavements aren't much safer – they've become slabs of sheet ice. People walk determinedly down the middle of the roads, which are intermittently gritted. Then more snow falls, coating the grit and hardening it into ice. There is a run on shovels in the local hardware supermarket. Cold-weather tyres have run out, and snow-chains too. I've never heard of anyone using snow-chains here before. The outdoor shops have no more ice-grips for boots but a friend has brought me some from Edinburgh where clearly they plan for winter better. With these attached, skimming at speed over ice and snow, suddenly I'm Hermes in climbing boots.

Now, I do everything and go everywhere on foot and buy only what I can carry. I work all morning and take time off in the afternoon to walk. Away from the busiest area of the city centre, I'm often the only person in the street. Traffic's sparse. By three thirty or so when it's already dusk, very few cars pass and I'm alone. It makes me think of wars, disasters, prolonged sieges, but it's only snow.

November 29th

Every morning as I sit down at my desk, before doing anything else – including beginning work – I check a website that will inform me if the

aurora borealis, the Northern Lights, may be seen later in the night skies above us. The site's called 'Aurora Watch', and is the website of the UK Sub-Auroral Magnetometer Network, SAMNET, the body that, on behalf of us all, keeps a usefully close eye on what's happening in the arcane universe of space weather and on the aurora borealis, the only sign visible from earth of the astonishing turbulences above us. The website has four possible messages: green, which indicates that there's no significant geomagnetic activity and that the aurora won't be seen from anywhere in Britain; yellow, which indicates that there's minor activity and it's unlikely to be seen except in the far north of Scotland; amber, which promises possible visibility in Scotland, the north of England and Northern Ireland, and red, that the aurora may be seen all over the country.

The appearance of the aurora is determined by the interaction of solar wind with the earth's atmosphere. Earth's molten core generates a magnetic field that deflects passing solar winds. Solar flares, a vast release of magnetic energy from the sun, affect earth's atmosphere, causing an acceleration in electrical activity, all of which combine to produce the aurora borealis. It seems, for reasons no one can yet explain, that the aurora appears more frequently at equinoxes, particularly the vernal.

Not long after we came here, we used to see the aurora. It wasn't a frequent occurrence, but was more frequent than it is now. Before I began my quotidian checking (in those days that now seem long ago but aren't really, when websites didn't exist) I relied on watching the sky, on friends phoning to say that the aurora could be seen from whatever

part of the town or country they were in. If it was near enough, we'd get into the car and drive out to experience this most wondrous of sights. We'd see it sometimes from the back garden too, this startling shimmering of light, pink and yellow, green and gold, falling over us like a strange ethereal curtain flung down from the high atmosphere, a soft canopy of moving luminescence dropping from the sky.

It's a long time since I last saw it, even though the aurora is one of the things for which this city is known. It may be known for other things too but the ones for which it is famous are the name it has given to a breed of fine cattle, for oil rigs and platforms and pipelines and for dazzling lights in the sky.

For years, I watched for it. Sometimes on clear nights, the light through the window blind in the bedroom would seem to shimmer and move in waves, and I'd pull the blind aside to check, but the sky was always dark and lightless. Over time, it became more common for public buildings and offices round about us to direct powerful beams of white and blue and even green light over their facades, for security or vainglory, lights that, all over the world, in every city, prevent us from seeing the sky. I'd look from the back windows onto the garden, still a small area of tree-protected darkness, down the line of unlit gardens and office car parks, or I'd stand in the middle of the grass, looking up, but while I might see a breathtaking spray of stars, or a lambent, brilliant moon, I didn't see the aurora.

Then, after a long time of not seeing it, I began to wonder, how common were sightings here? How often was it seen in the past?

Named by Galileo after his observation in 1619, '*aurora boreale*',

‘northern dawn’ and thought by him, wrongly, to be the sun’s reflection on the earth’s atmosphere, the foundation of many of the creation myths of northern peoples, the aurora has been interpreted and seen as shoals of herring in the sky, as swans in ice, flights of migrating geese, fire sparking from the coat of a fox, and in Inuit legend, as the spirits of the dead playing with the skull of a walrus – all this to explain sheets of light moving in the sky.

It makes me wonder how long it takes for a natural phenomenon to be incorporated into the cultural history of a place, referred to in song, adopted in the naming of pubs, bands, petrol stations. The perception that there were simply fewer sightings wasn’t, as I had suspected, just an incomer’s perception – people who were brought up in Aberdeen commented on it too and we wondered if, for all of us, it was a trick of memory, a golden-age imagining of natural and altogether past perfection, or perhaps of childhood, those illusory moments from which we’re putting distance, all too fast.

The question is on my mind at a gathering of friends when we begin to discuss the lack of sightings of the aurora. We all refer back to the fact that there’s even a song about it – ‘The Northern Lights Of Old Aberdeen’ – as maudlin and sentimental a ditty as anyone ever heard sung by drunk men anywhere. We decide that no one would make up a song on the basis of nothing at all, or not a song that sounded as if it was about something quite so specific. Would they? We begin to discuss the words, wondering if there might have been a misunderstanding, if they might refer to the terrestrial lights seen from a distance by the seafarer approaching his home from the sea, and not to the aurora.

Although sober, we each take turns to sing the bits we can remember of this dismal, unmelodic work. The chorus we recall as being something to do with a traveller longing to see the lights of Aberdeen although nobody can remember the exact words. One person believes that in the verse, there's mention of the Northern Lights looking like heavenly dancers in the sky and so, while avoiding discussion of the artistic or musical merits of the work, we all agree, city and country dweller alike, that there can be no doubt about the fact that the aurora was an established fact of Aberdeen life, and that none of us has seen any celestial dancing, or not of that particular sort, for years.

But solar weather operates in cycles, and it seems that one is ending. It would just about coincide with the paucity of sightings. The words that describe the inception of the aurora – *auroral ribbon, magnetospheric sunstorms, solar wind, sudden storm commencement* – are almost enough in themselves. They're inspiring, exciting, these words of passion flung up towards a possibly deceptively peaceful sky.

Today, as usual, I'm told that here at least we're not going to see it. 'No significant activity', the message says. Though it seems worth the vigilance. There are specific features of life in northern latitudes: the weather, naturally, a kind of ley line of proximity, our closeness to Scandinavia, or our inclusion in the magnetic sphere of the aurora borealis, that create a sense of otherness from the rest of the country. This is a place where, like no other, one pays attention to the smaller changes of light and season, to solstice and equinox, the lengthening and the shortening of days.

All morning as I work, I hear Ziki the crow calling as he always does

when there's snow. He's looking from the window of the room where he lives on to the snow-lit garden, listening to music and cawing loudly. After years of there being many birds and creatures in the house, the numbers are reduced. Now, in addition to Ziki, there's Bec's cockatiel, Bardie, the first bird we got, and there's the rook, Chicken. Both have lived here for almost as long as we have. Ziki the crow is only four, the only one who, in bird terms, isn't old.

I'm distracted, sitting at my desk, turning constantly to watch the altering sky. After a clear blue dawn, it deepens to azure in the east and over the next hours, fades to chalky, icy white and then it snows again. This time, it's not the big, slow flakes that fall grey on white against the sky. These are small flakes, grains of snow, quick falling, a fast unburdening. I feel as if I'm just beginning to learn the subtleties of snow. I become aware of a robin who has come to sit on the other side of the glass. He's on the sagging canopy of clematis that has been unmoored by the weight of snow. I can see a dust of whiteness on his breast feathers, the swiftness of his breathing.

The morning darkens down and down and still more snow falls. Outside the study window, a grey city is turned by the light into a city from an Edwardian silver print of roofs and walls and branches; a heavy, tinted sky. I take a photo on my phone from the study window to send to a friend in England, an Aberdonian-in-exile.

'Just to show you what you're missing!' I write, a fatuous enough message. A few seconds later, a brilliant point of light flashes into my eye from outside. I'm startled for a moment. In this inexplicable parallel moment, it seems as if someone's taking a photograph of me,

someone unseen, perhaps at the bottom of the garden. What is the flash of light? Could it be lightning? I know it is only when, a few seconds later, it begins to thunder, a sound as large and dark as the sky. Snow and thunder. How?

In fact, it's a rare, named natural phenomenon, *thundersnow*. (It sounds like the title of a forgotten classic of northern European literature.) It happens, I discover, when moist air, cold enough to produce snow but warmer than the layers of air above in the troposphere – the lower portion of earth's atmosphere, the bit where weather happens – rises strongly, forming snow and ice inside unstable clouds, triggering thunder and lightning, when snow falls instead of rain, delighting the hearts of meteorologists everywhere. And my heart too. It's magnificent, exhilarating! Thundersnow! (Rare though it is, it happens again not long after when snow falls in January over Alabama.)

December 3rd

This morning, I'm driven to a quiet place in the Aberdeenshire countryside twenty miles away, to take part in an item for a radio programme about rooks in snow. They've been seen picking at something in the middle of roads and Mark Stephen from the BBC and I go to find out if they are, and at what, and why. The wide, usually busy dual carriageway is reduced to a thin, one-lane passage between low walls of snow. Outside the city, it's an ice world of frozen fields and

trees and sky. Icicles like eerie, glittering fortifications hang from city roofs but in the villages they've solidified to long and glistening spears of frozen water almost reaching the ground. Beyond the windows of the car is a make-believe world of mythic winter, where palisades of ice seem to be defending fairy-tale cottages, forming bars against the doors of witches' houses. (Idly, I wonder if an icicle would make the perfect murder weapon. Other people must have thought of it, in literature anyway, but I don't know if anyone has tried it. It reminds me of our magpie stealing and hiding ice cubes – the effects are the same whether it's booty or evidence – ice melts.)

Fields have become smoothed-out plains of glistening, crusted ice, stilled surfaces glancing a fierce and blinding dazzle in the cold, brilliant sun. Hoar frost coats forests, whole trees, single branches, glinting, sparking blue and white and fire from the light and air. Every soft fall of snow from branches explodes to mist in a rainbow of fine-hazed spindrift. We stand on a farm road in the ringing silence and talk of the effects of road grit and road salt on birds, and of rook behaviour and, tangentially, about a type of motorised American bird-feeder that springs into action when a squirrel tries to feed, flinging the unfortunate beast off the feeder or tipping up the perch. Unhelpfully, there are very few rooks to be seen. It's only on the drive back that we see why – a manure heap we pass is teeming with rooks seeking warmth and any insects there might be in this suddenly changed and inhospitable land.

December 7th

Since being outside the city, albeit briefly, I've felt even more surrounded and enclosed. This morning, I sit at my desk and take from the shelf my old, worn copy of *Tao – The Watercourse Way*, a book on Chinese philosophy by the great Zen and Taoism scholar Alan Watts. The quietude and stillness seem to encourage meditative thought, or else it's just one of the moments of guilt I experience from time to time at having forgotten quite so much of what I learned long ago.

Certain Chinese philosophers writing in, perhaps, the fifth and fourth centuries explained ideas and a way of life that have come to be known as *Taoism* – the way of man's cooperation with the course or trend of the natural world, whose principles we discover in the flow patterns of water, gas and fire which are subsequently memorialised or sculptured in those of stone or wood, and, later, in many forms of human art.

Watts explains what he believed to be the importance of these ideas for our time, a time when 'we are realising that our efforts to rule nature by technical force ... may have disastrous results'. (The book was incomplete at the author's death in 1973, and was completed by his friend Al Chung-Liang Huang and published in 1975.)

This morning, I reacquaint myself with the ideas of yin and yang, the forces that are part of all life on this earth, the principles of polarity and balance, the existence of both in all things, ideas so much at

variance with Western ideas of opposition and opposites, conflict and vanquishing. I reread some of the writings of Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu and Lieh Tzu and remind myself of the central Taoist principle of *'wu wei'*, translated and explained variously as 'masterly inactivity', 'not forcing', 'knowing when not to act'. It seems like a good idea. It is illustrated by Alan Watts with a metaphor that feels strikingly appropriate, one of branches of pine and willow under snow, their differing qualities of breaking under weight, or bending, springing back.

Reading about the Tao, 'the Way', I'm far from sure what it is, of what significance there might be in snow, floods, rain. There's no way of knowing if one year's cataclysms of climate might be related, or even portentous but the words I read speak of wholeness and a different way of living, of perceiving the world and our actions in it. I don't know if even thinking about it is escape, or hope where there is none, or if trying to look equably at the world is doing the only thing one can.

Alan Watts's advice to his readers in preparing for an understanding of the text to come, is: 'Take it that you are not going anywhere but here, and that there never was, is, or will be any time but now,' and he suggests putting aside for the moment all opinion, all knowledge except in the interpretation and acknowledgement of sensation, to appreciate what is without giving it a name, to listen and see and breathe in a state without word or thought.

'Stop, look and listen . . . and stay there awhile before you go on reading.'

December 11th

Often when you're walking through the city, you can hear unseen water. It gurgles unexpectedly under one crossroads, gushes strangely below my feet at another. As you walk on, the source of it appears – the Denburn, flowing through deep-constructed channels beside a row of offices before it disappears again under the road, through culverts and on towards the harbour where it enters the sea. It's heard best after heavy rain, even from behind the fortifications of the large granite houses with their long gardens in the steep declivity of Rubislaw Den where it runs through the gorge formed by glacial meltwater, a valley that bisects the centre of the city. You hear the burn in spate on a cool evening in summer after rain when light shimmers on the summer leaves and everything's heavy with dampness, but now there's only a still and freezing silence.

Today, I walk for a while along the banks of the Dee near Duthie Park. The margins of the river have frozen. Broken, milky patches of ice drift in the black water. Gulls stand massed on the shingle islets. Their feathers lift easily from their head and wings, white-fringed in the freezing winds. Waxwings flit and scatter, searching for berries on the cotoneasters and holly in the snow-covered gardens.

On the way home in the afternoon, I find a fledgling in the lane. In spite of my decision to abjure bird-rescue for ever, I bring him home. There's nothing else I can do. He's a small pigeon with a damaged wing. I examine the wing, which doesn't look very bad. If he survives, I'll wait until he's ready and let him go.

December 12th

Every day the snow seems still more churned and frozen. A new pavement landscape appears: a fresh set of ice ditches, ridges and mounds form and freeze. Everyone has to pay close attention to the elemental business of putting one foot in front of the other. Walking for a long time in snow seems to affect different muscles and makes me aware of small alterations and tensions in the legs and hips, a bit like the effects of walking for a long time on sand.

December 20th

Tomorrow morning, there's to be a total eclipse of the moon.