

I

# Hen Harrier

*Orkney*



**I**t begins where the road ends beside a farm. Empty sacking, silage breath, the car parked amongst oily puddles. The fields are bright after rain. Inside one puddle, a white plastic feed sack, crumpled, like a drowned moon. Then feet up on the car's rear bumper, boots loosened and threaded, backpacks tightened. Wanting to rain: a sheen of rain, like the thought of rain,

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has settled on the car and made it gleam. When I bend to tie my boots I notice tiny beads of water quivering like mercury on the waxed leather. Eric is with me, who knows this valley intimately, who knows where the kestrel has its nest above the burn and where the short-eared owls hide their young amongst the heather. We leave the farm and start to walk along the track towards the swell of the moor.

Closer the fields look greasy and soft. The track begins to leak away from under us and soon the bog has smothered it completely. We are amongst peat hags and pools of amber water. Marsh orchids glow mauve and pink amongst the dark reed grass. The sky is heavy with geese: greylags, with their snowshoe gait, long thick necks snorkelling the heather. You do not think they could get airborne; they run across the moor beating at the air, nothing like a bird. And with a heave they are up, calling with the rigmarole of it all, stacking themselves in columns of three or four. They fly low over the moor, circling above us as if in a holding pattern. When a column of geese breaks the horizon it looks like a dust devil has spun up from the ground to whirl slowly down the valley towards us.

Late May on a hillside in Orkney; nowhere I would rather be. It is a place running with birds. Curlews with their rippling song and long delicate bills and the young short-eared owls keeking from their hideout in the heather. And all that heft and noise of goose. When the greylags leave, shepherding their young down off the moor, following the burns to the lowland lochs and

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brackish lagoons, then, surely, undetectably, the moor must inflate a little, breathing out after all that weight of goose has gone.

We find a path that cuts through a bank of deep heather. It leads up onto the moor and the horizon lifts. I can see the hills of Hoy with their wind-raked slopes of scree and the sea below with its waves like the patterns of the scree. This morning the sea is a livery dark, creased with white lines that map the movement of the swell. It looks as if the sea is full of cracks, splinters of ice.

Wherever you turn on Orkney the sea is at your back, linking the islands with its junctions of light. It is not enough that the islands are already so scattered. The sea is always gnawing at them, looking for avenues to open up, fractures in the rock to prise apart. The sea up here has myriad ways to breach the land. It showers the western cliffs with its salty mists and peoples the thin soils with its kin: creeping willow, eyebright, sea thrift, sea plantain, all plants that love the sea's breath on them.

It is a trickster sea that comes ashore with subterfuge. Orkney children once made imaginary farms with scallop shells for sheep, gaper shells for pigs, as if the sea, like a toymaker, had carved each shell and left it on the shore, waiting for a passing child. And at night selchies dock in the deep geos and patter ashore in their wet skins to slip amongst the dozing kye.

I arrived on Orkney in the dregs of a May gale. Low pressure swelling in from the Atlantic, hurting buildings and trees in their new growth, ransacking birds' nests. Rushing across Scotland and speeding up over Orkney as

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if the gale had hit a patch of ice. The hardest thing of all up here, I'd heard, was learning to endure the wind, worse than the long winter darkness. It is a fidgety wind, rarely still, boisterous, folding sheds and hen houses, raking the islands' lochs into inland seas.

This morning the wind still has a sinewy strength. Lapwings are lifted off the fields like flakes of ash. Eric is telling me about the valley. He is alert to the slightest wren-flick through the heather, seeing the birds before they arrive. When he speaks the wind gashes at his words, gets inside them. The hill is shaking with wind. We pass the kestrel's nest and Eric points out a clump of rushes on the hillside where a hen harrier is sitting on her eggs. She is invisible on her bed of rush and ling. Her eggs are pale white, polished, stained with the colours of the nest material. If you could see like a hawk you would notice her bright yellow eyes, framed by a white eyebrow on a flat owl-like face. The face made rounder by the thick neck ruff that flickers bronze and almond-white like the ring around a planet.

Then Eric is leaving and I don't feel I have thanked him enough. I watch him descend the moor, walking quickly along the gleaming track towards the farm and the car like a skiff bobbing amongst the lit puddles. After he has gone there is a sudden rush of rain. But the wind is so strong it seems to hold the rain up, stops it reaching the ground, flinging the shower away, crashing it into the upper slopes of the hill. Only my face and hair are briefly wet; the rest of me stays dry, as if I'd poked my head into a cloud. I have never seen rain behave this way. Months

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later I came across a list of beautiful old Orkney dialect words for different types of rain and wondered which described the behaviour of that wind-blown shower: *driv, rug, murr, muggerafeu, hagger, dagg, rav, hellyiefer* ... A *rug*, perhaps, meaning 'a strong pull', rain that was being pulled, yanked away by the wind.

I had not thanked Eric nearly enough. For a walk like that will have its legacies, store itself in you like a muscle's memory. Walking up through layers of birds, Eric explaining the narrative of the moor, where last year's merlins hid their nest, where cattle had punctuated the dyke and damaged the delicate hillside. Till we reached a fold in the hills, the 'nesting station', where the hen harriers had congregated their nests, and we could go no further.

I know of other walks, like the one with Eric that morning, where their legacy is precious and defining, walks born out of that experience of guiding or being guided. My great-grandfather, Seton Gordon, in the early summer of 1906, when he was only twenty, walked into the Grampian Mountains with his boyhood hero, the naturalist Richard Kearton. That walk began with Gordon telegramming Kearton with the news he had found a ptarmigan's nest, one of the few birds, Gordon knew, that Kearton had never photographed. Kearton packed hastily and rushed to catch the next train to Scotland. Early June, travelling north through strata of light; a 600-mile journey from Surrey to Aberdeenshire, where Gordon met Kearton off the train at Ballater. They decide to climb

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the mountain at night to avoid the heat of the day, setting off in the dusk, the smell of pine and birch all around them. Kearton is lame (he was left permanently lame after a childhood accident) and has to walk slowly, stopping often to rest. They toil up the mountain through the thin June dark, Kearton bent like a hunchback under the huge camera he is carrying (the heaviest Gordon has ever seen). At 1.45 a.m. a redstart's song spurs them on.

They reach the snowfield beside the ptarmigan's nest at 6 a.m. The sun is up and bright, the short grass sparkles. Kearton assembles his camera on its tripod and begins, cautiously, to crawl towards the sitting bird. She is a close sitter, Gordon reassures him, and if he stalks her very slowly she should sit tight. The next few moments are so precarious: Kearton exposes a number of plates and after each exposure he edges a little closer towards the ptarmigan. He stops when he is just nine feet away. He can hear his heart thumping in his chest. One last exposure, that's it! He is close enough to see the bird breathing and the dew pearled across her back.

Seventy years later, the year before he died, Gordon was still able to recall that walk, writing about it in an article for *Country Life* magazine. The details of that day still fresh and resonant: the brightness of the sun that morning, the dew along the ptarmigan's back, the cost of the telegram he sent to Kearton (sixpence).

Richard Kearton's photographs of birds, taken at the end of the nineteenth century (many with his brother, Cherry Kearton), were to my great-grandfather what Gordon's own photographs of birds are to me, jewels of

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inspiration. I grew up surrounded by Gordon's black and white photographs of birds: golden eagles, greenshanks, gannets, dotterels ... peering down at me from their teak frames. I liked to take the frames off the wall, wipe the dust from the glass, then turn the pictures over to read the captions Gordon had written on the back of each print:

- Female eagle 'parasoling' eaglets. The eaglet is invisible on the other side of the bird.
- The golden eagle brings a heather branch to the eyrie.

Whenever I have moved house the first pictures I hang on the new walls are two small photographs Gordon took, one of a jackdaw pair, black and pewter, the other of a hooded crow in its sleeveless silver waistcoat. Under a cupboard I keep a great cache of Gordon's photographs in an ancient marble-patterned canvas folder. You have to untie three string bows to open the folder, and every time I do so a fragment of the canvas frays and disintegrates. My young children like to open the folder with me, and the process of going through the photographs with them – identifying the birds and mammals – has become a lovely ritual. The photographs are beautiful. I am still amazed that anyone could get so close to a wild bird as Gordon did, and photograph it in such exquisite detail. In one photograph, taken in 1922, a golden eagle lands on its nest with a grouse in its talons as a cloud of flies spumes out from an old carcass on the eyrie, as if the landing eagle has triggered an explosion. There is a stun-

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ning photograph he took of a pair of greenshanks just at the moment the birds change over incubation duties at their nest. One bird steps over the nest, ready to settle, as its mate pulls itself off the clutch of four eggs. The timing of the photograph, to capture the precise moment of the changeover, is extraordinary. The patterning on the eggs matches the patterns down the greenshank's breast as if one has imprinted – stained – the other.

Along with Richard Kearton and another wildlife photographer, R. B. Lodge (both important influences on Gordon), Gordon was in the vanguard of early bird photography in this country. Cycling around Deeside in the first years of the twentieth century with his half-plate Thornton Pickard Ruby camera with Dallmeyer lens, Gordon took many exceptional photographs of birds and the wider fauna of the region. Upland species were his speciality: snow bunting, curlew, red-throated diver, ptarmigan ... Many of these photographs he published in the books he wrote. Twenty-seven books in all, the bulk of them about the wildlife and landscapes of the Highlands and Islands. His books take up a wall of shelving in my house; greens and browns and pale silver spines, embossed with gold lettering: *Birds of the Loch and Mountain*; *The Charm of the Hills*; *In Search of Northern Birds*; *Afoot in the Hebrides*; *Wanderings of a Naturalist*; *The Cairngorm Hills of Scotland*; *Amid Snowy Wastes*; *Highways and Byways in the West Highlands* ... I love their Edwardian-sounding titles, the earthy colours of their spines, the smell and feel of the books' thick-cut paper with its ragged, crenulated edges.

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Of all the birds that Gordon photographed and studied, the golden eagle was the one he came to know the best. Eagles were his abiding love, his expertise. He published two monographs on them: *Days with the Golden Eagle* in 1927 and *The Golden Eagle: King of Birds* in 1955. Both these studies, particularly the latter, went on to influence and inspire a subsequent generation of naturalists and raptor ornithologists. I often come across warm references to Gordon's golden eagle studies in the forewords and acknowledgements of contemporary works of ornithology. His two golden eagle books were also a huge influence on me. I read them many times when I was a teenager. They set this book gestating.

And then there's my own version of Gordon's walk with Kearton. A family holiday on the Isle of Lewis. I am fourteen or fifteen. In the photos from that week we are sitting on the island's vast, empty beaches, our hair washed out at right angles by the wind. Family picnics: brushing the sand off sandwiches, a lime-green thermos of tomato soup. In the background, sand dunes, a squall inside the marram grass, a blur of gannet flying west.

One day out walking on the moors I discovered something momentous. I had been following a river into the hills and as I came up over the watershed I noticed a small loch lying in a shallow dent of the moor. Wherever there is a depression in the land on Lewis, water gathers. It patterns the island intricately, beautifully. From the air much of the land looks tenuous, as if it is breaking apart,

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a network of walkways floating on black water. The loch I came across – a lochan – a small pool of peat-dark water, like a sunspot against the purple moor. In its centre, rowing round and round, beating the lochan's bounds, a red-throated diver with its chick. I was mesmerised. They are beautiful, rare birds that I had read about but never seen. I sat down in a bank of heather above the loch and watched the bird's sleek outline, the faint blush of her throat. Always the sense in her streamlined shape that, sitting on the water, she was not quite in her element, that once she dived, like an otter, the water would transform her. But I had to get back – needed to get back – and tell someone. I raced over the moor and gasped out my discovery to nodding, distracted faces.

Except for Mum. She was interested. She wanted to hear more about what I had found, got me to show her in a bird book what the diver looked like, listened when I explained how its eerie, otherworldly call was supposed to forewarn of rain. And the next morning it rained but Mum and I walked across the moor to the lochan where I had found the divers. And so I became a guide, leading my mother up the river and over the rise in the moor, and in doing so felt something Gordon must have felt guiding Richard Kearton up the flank of the mountain through the night. Me walking far too fast in my exhilaration, almost running over the peat bog, Mum calling me to slow down. Reaching the lochan: the two of us sitting down in the heather, catching our breath. Mum asking if she could borrow my binoculars.

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Where Eric left me became my home for the next two days. I walked up the valley in the early morning, looking for the print my weight had made in the heather the day before; not recognisably my shape, more like a shallow quail scooped out of the heather as if snow had slept there and in the morning left and left behind its thaw-stain on the ground. The heather held me almost buoyant in its thickness. I settled down in it like a hare crouched in its form, felt the wind running over my back.

Rummaging through Orkney's deceased dialects I borrowed a handful of words besides those I had found to describe the different kinds of rain. Loaned words to help me navigate the land. I liked the ways, like a detailed map, they attended to the specifics, to the margins of the landscape around me. *Cowe*: a stalk of heather, which the wind swept like a windscreen wiper across my view of the moor; *burra*: hard grass found in moory soil; *gayro*: the sward on a hillside where the heather has been exterminated by water. And this word – a lovely gift – which described perfectly my form in the heather, *beul*: a place to lie down or rest.

To reach my *beul* on the moor I had to pass through different zones of birds. Each species seemed to occupy its own layer of the valley as if it adhered to an underlying geology of the place. Oystercatchers over a layer of marl, curlews spread across a bed of sandstone. All of these territories seeping, blurring into each other along fault lines in the moor. For a long time I struggled to get a hold of the birds. There was so much movement

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amongst them, so many birds to keep track of. I began to draw Venn diagrams of the birds' locations and their movements across the moor till the pages of my notebook were filled with overlapping water rings. Gradually I came to see this small patch of moorland as the meeting point of several territories. There were four species of raptor alone breeding in the heather around me – kestrel, hen harrier, merlin and short-eared owl – and these birds' interaction with each other, and with the large population of breeding wader birds, the curlews in particular, held me captivated over the two days I was there.

Trespassing, ghosting through all these territories like blown fragments of white silk, were the short-eared owls. The focus of their territory was a shifting area that moved around the location of the young owls as they dispersed through the deep heather. Sometimes I passed close by the owlets, hidden from me, calling loudly to their parents for food. Their high-pitched *keek* drilled through me as if I was passing through a scanner. Then the adult birds appeared beside me. They arrived suddenly, quietly, like shapes congealed out of mist. They flew very close, hovering just above my head. Pale white underwings marked with black crease lines as if in places the wings were beginning to thaw. Their faces a deep snow-cloud grey. Black eye-bands, like masks, which set their bright yellow eyes deep in their cupped faces. Always, as the owls hung above me, a sense of being watched and of their gaze penetrating through me. Beautiful in their buoyancy. Wing-tippers, possessed of

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twisting grace, flickering low over the moor like giant ghost moths.

I never expected to see so much so soon on this journey. I had set off fully expecting to be frustrated, to not find many of the birds I was looking for. But Orkney gave me so much time with its birds of prey, spoilt me utterly in that respect, so that every stage along my journey since has harked back to the time I spent on the islands.

There was an old charm used on Orkney which was supposed to heal deep cuts to the skin. To initiate the cure you had to send the name of the wounded person to the local enchanter or witch-doctor (the Old Norse term was *vǫlva*, meaning a wand carrier). The *vǫlva* would then add some new words to the patient's name, as if they were sprinkling ingredients into a recipe. This word-concoction was then chanted repeatedly until, through some telepathic alchemy, the wound was healed. The charm worked even though the *vǫlva* performing it might be several miles away from their patient. After I left Orkney – and was many hundreds of miles away from the islands – I often wanted to send word back to the place, hoping the islands could perform their charm on me once more and help me find the birds I was searching for, just as they had gifted them to me while I was there.

How does a hen harrier live? It swims over the land as a storm petrel hugs the surface of the sea. It flies so low that sometimes it seems to be stirring the grass, its long

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legs trailing through the heather like a keel. A slow, tacking flight: float then flap. Then a twisting pirouette and it has swung onto a different tack, following another seam through the moor as if it is tracking a scent. It is like watching a disembodied spirit searching for its host, like a spirit twisting and drifting in the breeze. The harrier rides the swell of the moor, clinging to the contours for cover, creeping up on its prey and surprising it with a sudden burst of speed. The moment before it swoops, the harrier stalls, adjusts its angle a fraction – kestrel-like – then drops suddenly to the ground, talons reaching, seizing through the deep grass.

Up on the moor a cold wind has found me, poking me for signs of life. It sets me shivering in my bed in the heather. A male hen harrier is taking his time, twirling a thread over the hill. He is the colour of smoke and lavender, glaucous. He has not killed. The female is up from her nest agitating him, calling repeatedly, pushing him away from the nest site, chivvying him to go and hunt. The male slips away down the valley towards the sea. Later in the morning, when he returns, flapping heavily up towards the moor, he seems brighter, sea-gleamed, as if the sea has dressed him in its brightness.

I stay with the female harrier expecting her to quickly settle on the nest. Instead, what happens next is startling, unexpected, one of those remarkable encounters that Orkney shared with me. She began to gain height, drawing herself up to just above the horizon. Then a pause as she floated there as if in a new-found buoyancy, as if on the apex of a thermal. Perhaps the thermal had a vacuum

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like a lift shaft running through its centre. Whatever it was, a route through the air opened up to her like a narrow channel – a lead – opening through pack ice. For she saw it, drew her wing tips back behind her, and plunged down through the opening in a beautiful corkscrew dive. At the last moment, before she crashed into the heather, swooping up again, rising above the moor, clearing the horizon, then leaning and tipping over into another dive. She was dancing! A mesmerising sky-dance, repeated over and over again, making a pattern in the air like the peaks and troughs of a frantic graph. I paused from watching her only to wipe the condensation from the lenses of my binoculars. Then I immediately fixed back on to her display. Was she signalling to the male, or simply flexing her flight muscles after a long stint on the nest? For twenty minutes she scored the air, and held me there.

The hardest thing to do was to leave the moor in the evening. I walked down through the restless geese and kept turning round in search of one last glimpse of the hen harriers. Sometimes I would follow a male harrier down off the peat moss and watch him quartering the marshy borderland between the fields and the moor. Much of Orkney's moorland has been reclaimed by agriculture. Only the difficult land remains as moor, but even this is sometimes coveted: there are hills on Orkney with strips of neat green fields dissecting the moor. In places it looks like the hills have been scalped. But in the borderlands between the moor and the fields there seemed to be a tussle between the two spheres so

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that it was unclear which was reclaiming the other. What had been tidied from the fields seemed to have been swept to these edges. And hen harriers thrived in these places, hunting voles along these tangled, unkempt margins.

I met hen harriers in unlikely places on the island. Far away from the moors, around the backs of houses, through the engine-ticking quiet of a farmyard. The birds seemed to slip easily between spheres, between the hills and the farmland below. In an evening field behind a white hotel, I watched a great commotion of oystercatchers and curlews dive-bombing a female harrier. She was slow and huge amongst the shrill wading birds, like some wandering beast come down out of the hills to forage.

Driving across the hill road to Harray in the early evening, I came down off the moor towards a farm and there was a male hen harrier swimming in a pool of wind. I stopped the car and watched him swirl through the farmyard, low over a hedge and into a back garden. He drifted up over a washing line and, for a moment, seemed to join the garments there, a blue-grey shirt flapping in the wind.

This morning the wind has shed some of its weight. The curlew's song has more reach. A male harrier is coming in from the west, lucent against the heather. He is flying more quickly than usual, keeping a straight line, heading for the nest that sits in the lap of a hill amongst thick tussocks of moor grass. Now the female is up and rising

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to greet him, rushing towards the male. She is so much larger than him, her colours so markedly different, her tawny browns set against his smoking greyness. For centuries the male and female hen harrier were thought to be a different species, and this morning she might have been a larger hawk about to set upon the smaller male. But, at the last moment, she twists onto her back beneath the male and their talons almost brush. The male releases something from his feet and she seizes and catches it in mid-air. All of this happens so quickly and the movement is astonishing for its speed and precision. I cannot make out what it is the male has passed to her but the female has flipped instantly upright again and is rising towards the male once more. Again, at the last moment, she twists onto her back but this time nothing is passed between them. I'm puzzled why she repeats the manoeuvre like this. Perhaps the male still has something in his talons? But I am lucky to witness it again, it is like an unexpected echo and gives me the chance to replay the whole extraordinary exchange. I stay with the female and watch her drop into the heather, where she begins to feed.

Why do hen harriers make this beautiful, acrobatic food pass? When she is incubating, then brooding and guarding the young at the nest, the female is dependent on the male to provide food for her and the chicks. Later, when the chicks are closer to leaving the nest, she will resume hunting. But until then the male must work overtime to provide for the brood and his mate. Polygamous males, common on Orkney, are required to ratchet up

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their hunting, providing for two, sometimes three, separate nests (the record on Orkney is seven). Nesting in tall dense vegetation on the ground, the food pass is the most efficient way of securing the exchange of prey whilst also distracting from the precise location of the nest, the pass often taking place some distance from the nest itself, which helps to avoid drawing its attention to predators. I wonder if the female ever drops the pass from the male. The hen harrier is so supremely agile, their long legs have such reach, it seems like the male could lob the most awkward pass at his mate and she would still pluck the prey out of the air with all the time to spare.

On Orkney, the Orkney vole (twice the size of the field vole found on the British mainland) is a crucial prey species for the hen harrier. The relatively high numbers of hen harriers on the islands (on those islands in the archipelago that have voles) is attributed to the abundance and stability of the vole population. Many hen harriers overwinter on Orkney and voles are the principal reason these birds are not forced to migrate further south. In addition to voles, young curlews and starlings are frequently taken on the islands, as well as meadow pipits, skylarks and lapwings. Rabbits, too, are predated by the larger female harrier. Where voles are absent, hen harriers are able to breed as long as there is an abundant supply of passerine birds. But on Orkney, and over much of the hen harrier's range, avian prey is, on the whole, secondary in importance and preference to voles and other small mammals, so much so that a scarcity of voles can impede the hen harrier's breeding

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success. In Gaelic the hen harrier's name is *Clamhan luch* (the mouse-hawk).

Midday and the moor is quiet, the slackest time of the day. The harriers are sitting tight. At Lammas time, under a full moon, people used to go up to the moors on Orkney to cut the stems of rushes to use as wicks for fish-oil lamps. And they went to the moors to gather the wiry cowberry stems to twist into ropes. The moors were a busier landscape than they are today, more interacted with. There was a steady trafficking of peats from off the moors: all the different grades of Orkney peat, peats that smelt of sulphur when they burnt, heavy *yarpha* peats with the moss and heather still on them, peats that burnt too quickly and left behind a bright creamy ash in the hearth. Geese (an important part of the economy on Orkney right up till the mid-nineteenth century) were brought down from the moors when they became broody and taken into people's homes. Most houses on the islands were designed to accommodate the geese, with a recess cut into the wall beside the hearth where they were lodged to incubate their eggs in the warmth.

I get up to stretch my legs and go for a wander through the network of peat hags. I liked the notion of geese being 'let in' to people's homes, of the architectural twist made to houses to accommodate the birds. In the Hebrides, if someone had an especially lucky day, it was said that they must have seen the *Clamhan luch*. In Devon the hen harrier was known as the *Furze hawk*; in Caithness the *Flapper*; *Hebog llwydlas* (the blue-grey hawk) in Wales;

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*Saint Julian's bird* in South Wales; in the English Midlands the *Blue hawk* ... We ought to let these birds back in. Today you can count the number of hen harriers nesting in England on your hand. And each year lop another finger off. They are not where they should be and their absence in the English uplands is shameful, a waste. A landscape devoid of hen harriers is an impoverished one. Hen harriers do predate red grouse – young grouse and weaker adult stock are the most vulnerable. But management of grouse moors and protection of hen harriers should not – does not need to – be incompatible. We need to let the harriers back in. Because a bird like this can change the way you see a landscape. Because (I promise you this) these birds will astonish you with their beauty. I wish others could see what I saw over Orkney, how the harriers made a ballet of the sky. I wish more people had the chance to see how the black wing tips of the male hen harrier are offset – made blacker – by his pearl-grey upper wings.

Some of the peat hags are so deeply cut into the moor it is like walking through a trench system. I can move across a flank of the hill without being seen. Except, of course, the short-eared owls have seen me. One of the adult birds has swum over to hover above my head. I can see the flickering gold and black patterns of its plumage, the gold like a dusting of pollen over its feathers. I sit down on the peat bank while the owl's shadow grazes over me. Earlier, I watched one of the owls and a male hen harrier hunting over the same patch of moorland. The owl seemed to hold something back. At least, the

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owl was not quite as fluid as the male harrier, who appeared to give himself over completely to the wind, like an appendage of the wind, sketching its currents and eddies, its tributaries of warm air.

Later: the moor is woken by a loud clapping noise. I peer over the trench and an owl is spiralling downwards, 'clapping' his wings together as he descends, signalling, displaying to his mate, bringing his great wings down beneath him as if he were crashing a pair of cymbals, whacking the air to show how much he owns it.

I follow the line of an old fence across the hill. Beneath one of the fence posts I find a small pile of harrier pellets. They look like chrysalids, parcels of hair wrapped around hints of bone as if something were forming in there. I can make out the tiny jawbone of a vole with a row of teeth along its edge, like a frayed clarinet reed.

The quiet ran on through the early afternoon. I hadn't expected this, that the moor could shush itself and doze in the day's thin warmth. How does a bird that was once seen as a harbinger of good fortune in the Hebrides become so reviled? Three hundred and fifty-one hen harriers are killed on two estates in Ayrshire between 1850 and 1854; one keeper on Skye kills thirty-two harriers in a single year in 1870; another, on the same island, accounts for twenty-five hen harriers in 1873. An article on Highland sports in *The Quarterly Review* of 1845 illustrates the attitudes of the day:

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Hawks of all sorts, from eagles to merlins destroy numbers [*of game*]. The worst of the family, and the most difficult to be destroyed is the hen harrier. Living wholly on birds of his own killing, he will come to no laid bait; and hunting in an open country, he is rarely approached near enough to be shot: skimming low, and quartering his ground like a well-trained pointer, he finds almost every bird, and with sure aim strikes down all he finds.

Though not so *difficult to be destroyed* as this article posits. The hen harrier, in fact (as Victorian game-book records testify), made an easy target: a large, slow-flying, ground-nesting bird with a tendency, amongst the females especially, to be fearless around humans when defending their nest. Female hen harriers are not unknown to dislodge hats, even scrape a person's scalp with their talons, should they venture too close to the nest.

A male harrier drifts along the horizon. He lands on a fence post and begins to preen. The fence follows the horizon and the harrier, perched there, is silhouetted against the backdrop of sky. He glimmers there. Then he drops, pirouettes, hesitates a few feet above the moor and lunges into the grass. It is a quick, purposeful drop, not like the half-hearted pounces I have seen. I know straight away he has killed. I can see him in the grass plucking, tearing at something. After this, he feeds for several minutes. Then he is up and carrying the prey in

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his talons, flying direct to the nest site. And there is the female rising, making straight towards him.

My last day on the islands. I decide, reluctantly, to leave the Orkney Mainland and its hen harriers and travel to the southernmost isle in the archipelago, South Ronaldsay. I have heard about a place on the island called 'The Tomb of the Eagles', a Neolithic chambered cairn overlooking the cliffs at Isbister. And, well ... the tomb's name is enough to make me want to visit.

Late morning and I am walking out across the fields towards the cliffs at Isbister. The heath shimmers in the warm air. In the distance, a broken farmstead surfaces out of the heath like a whale. When I find the tomb I lie down beside the sea pink and begin to crawl along the narrow tunnel that leads into the tomb's interior. Inside, it is a nest of cool air. The stone walls are rent with algae sores, green and verdigris capillaries. I make my way to the far end of the tomb and duck into a side chamber; it has a moonscape floor, sandy, strewn with pebbles. I sit down inside the cell with my back against the rock.

In 1958, Ronnie Simison, a farmer from South Ronaldsay, was walking over his land looking for stone to quarry for use as fence posts. He walked along the sea cliffs at the eastern edge of his farm. Below him fulmars were nesting on sandstone ledges, a seal was berthing in Ham Geo, curlews moved amongst marsh orchids and eyebright. Perhaps it was the pink splash of sea thrift that caught his eye and drew him to the arrangement of

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stones the weather had recently exposed, a grassy mound peeled back to reveal a sneak of wall. A spade was fetched and Simison began to dig down beside the wall. As he dug the stones spilt things about his feet as if his spade had disturbed a crèche of voles. He picked each object up and laid it out beside him on the grass: a limestone knife; a stone axe head; a black bead, polished and shiny, that stared back at him like an eye. Then his spade had found an opening and darkness was spilling out of a doorway like oil. He fumbled in his pockets and pulled out a cigarette lighter, stretched his arm into the darkness and flicked the lighter's wheel. The bronze shapes he saw flickering back at him must have made him nearly drop the lighter. Certainly, the story goes, Simison ran the mile back across the swaying grassland to his home where, breathless and sweating, he picked up the telephone and called the police.

Inside the tomb I can hear a curlew trilling above the heath. I crawl back down along the tunnel and out into the bright sea glare. My trousers are covered in dust from sitting on the cell's floor and, as I walk along the cliffs, it looks like my legs are smoking as the breeze cleans the dust from my clothes.

The darkness Ronnie Simison's spade had cut loose from the mound that summer's evening was 5,000 years old. The mound was a Neolithic chambered cairn, and staring back at Simison when he sparked his lighter into the dark hole was a shelf of human skulls, resinous in the flickering light. There might have been a second or two when Simison mistook the bones' bronzed colours for a

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cache of treasure before he realised what they were, grabbed his spade, and ran.

When the tomb came to be excavated, amongst the human bones it was discovered that there were many bones and talons belonging to white-tailed sea eagles. In all, seventy sea-eagle talons were found and, in some instances, the birds' talons had been placed beside the bones of human individuals (one person had been buried with fifteen talons and the bones of two sea eagles). It is estimated that there were thirty-five skeletons of birds of prey in the tomb and of these two-thirds belonged to sea eagles.

The sea eagle was clearly a bird of totemic significance for the people living in that part of Orkney at that time. Presumably the bird performed some sort of funerary or shamanistic role for the community, perhaps in accompanying the dead on their journey to the afterlife, perhaps in assisting shamans in their magico-religious ceremonies. The importance of birds in shamanistic rituals is well known and there are archaeological examples from different cultures around the world of birds being involved in ceremonial and mortuary practices. In Alaska archaeologists unearthed a grave from a proto-Eskimo settlement at Ipiutak in which an adult and a child had been interred alongside, amongst other artefacts, the head of a loon (a species of diver). Strikingly, the diver's skull had lifelike artificial eyes (carved ivory for the white of the eye inlaid with jet for the black pupils) placed in its eye sockets. It's possible these ivory eyes served as a prophylactic to ward against evil (some

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human skulls from the settlement also contained artificial eyes). Equally, the eyes may have been placed in the diver in recognition of the belief amongst circumpolar peoples that the loon, a totemic bird for these cultures, was a bird with the power to both restore sight and also assist shamans with seeing into – and travelling through – different worlds.

In the museum a mile from the tomb some of the skulls have been given names: ‘Jock Tamson’, ‘Granny’, ‘Charlie-Girl’. Beside the skulls there were pieces of pottery, fragments of bowl decorated by the imprint of human fingernails. The nails had scratched the wet clay and left a pattern like a wavy barcode around the bowl’s rim. I picked some of the sea-eagle talons out of their case and held them in my palm, running my fingers over their blunted points. They were smooth to touch, like polished marble, their creamy colours flecked with rust.

The human bones, in contrast to the eagle and other animal bones in the cairn, were found to be in poor condition, noticeably bleached and weathered. This weathering suggests that the human dead were excarnated, given ‘sky burials’, their bodies exposed to the elements on raised platforms to be cleaned by natural decay and carrion feeders like the sea eagle. Besides the eagle bones, which were by far the most numerous, there were also bones of other carrion-feeding birds inside the tomb: two greater black-backed gulls, two rooks or crows and one raven. Once the excarnation process had been completed, the human skeletons – their bones scattered

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by carrion birds and bleached by the sun – would have been gathered up and interred inside the tomb.

That the sea eagles were involved in the excarnation of the human dead on Orkney is almost certain given that the bird is such a prodigious carrion feeder. Excarnation: the separation (of the soul) from the body at death, the opposite of incarnation, where the soul or spirit is clothed, embodied in flesh. Excarnation is not just a method for disposing the dead (to excarnate means to remove the flesh). It was also, for some societies, the process by which the spirit or soul could be released from the flesh. Tibetan Buddhists believed that the vultures summoned to a sky burial were spirits of the netherworld come to assist the soul on its journey to its next incarnation. In parts of the Western Highlands of Scotland it was unlucky to kill seagulls because it was believed the birds housed the souls of the dead. For what better, more natural place to rehome the soul – the restless, fidgety soul – than a bird, whose shape and movement, whose own restless flight, could be said to resemble the soul? Perhaps the Neolithic peoples of Orkney believed something similar, that when sea eagles, this great totemic bird, cleaned the bodies of their dead, the person's spirit, which after death still lived on inside the flesh, was taken in by the eagle. The spirit or soul transmigrated to the bird, lived on inside the bird. Human and eagle fusing – literally, ceremonially – each one inhabiting the other.