

*Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in,
therein to be content.*

Helen Keller

On Absolute Darkness

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We are sitting in the darkness before a drawing of a black horse. It rests, as it has for the last 17,000 years, in a low alcove along the cave wall in Hornos de la Pena. We are three: Raul, our guide, Jessica, my assistant, and me.

“What do you see?” I ask.

We have turned out the lights and are sitting in the depths of absolute darkness.

We all say nothing at first, adjusting to the completeness of the darkness. I call out in a deep voice and a high voice testing the echo of the space in the cave.

“Hola...Hola...Hola!”

Though the sound reverberates it doesn't hit me in the solar plexus the way it does in some caves. If I had to give it a number from one to ten in the same way nurses in hospital ask patients to rate their pain, it would be a four, as the sound is round and warm, but it does not move me. I would not sing here, or ask Raul to offer up some Spanish bass notes to warm the space as he had done in Las Chimeneas's deer chamber a few days before.

We sit for a while longer. I am waiting quietly for the others to tell me what they see.

“Azul” Raul says after a long pause. “Lineas azules.” Blue lines.

That’s what I see, too. In almost every cave where we have done this exercise of sitting in the darkness and playing with our voices against the walls, I have seen the same. A faint glow of light in shades of blue. Sometimes long strands of light that seem to follow the curvature of how I imagine the ceiling to be. Oftentimes, though I know it is impossible, I believe I can see the outline of my hand as I hold it up to my face to examine. It is in shadow but I see the outlines of my fingers against a sort of quietly radiant blue.

“I see green.” Jess says.

Raul laughs and in Spanish that even I can understand clearly says, “that’s because you are an extra terrestrial. Si?”

We laugh. “Blue is the normal color” Raul teases. “You?” He shakes his head at Jessica, or I imagine him shaking his head as I cannot see it, “You...I don’t know.”

We sit for a while longer in the darkness as it is soft, comfortable, and we have worked hard in this cave for two days so the few moments of simply resting our eyes against the pillow of darkness is most welcome.

Raul asks me if I will come back to do a study on sound some day. I tell him I would like to, but I don’t know how or what it would say. “You didn’t know much when you started this one either,” he says quietly in a way that does hit me in the middle of my chest, “And now you do.”

He is right. For twelve years I’ve been involved in the study of finger flutings – lines drawn on the walls of Paleolithic caves with fingers. In the beginning I knew nothing, but over time some aspects, some stories, some people who’ve been quietly

dormant for tens of thousands of years, have come, even if only in a little way, back in the light.

The experience of working in the caves is like no other. I should tell you that I am not inherently drawn to caves. In fact, the opposite. I am a creature of light who tends to wither in grey places. The crepuscular gloom of an English November or a Kiwi May leaves me clawing at my skin. I built a house of windows in New Zealand and travel often there with a friend there who is even more light conscious than I. She times departures and arrivals on our itineraries so as to catch a particular slant of light on hills or to amplify the possibility of seeing lenticular clouds over Omarama – the valley the Maori's called 'the place of clear light.'

Equally, I admit that I don't understand the current fashion of 'man caves' or inhabiting windowless sheds. Curtains are a complete mystery to me. My one foray into a floatation tank was traumatic. I still don't quite understand how spas, thinking they are clever, have adopted a form of torture outlawed by the Geneva Convention and have turned into 'therapy.'

And yet despite all of this, I am comfortable, or at least at ease in the caves. There is something alluring and powerful about the experience of absolute darkness and about being deep inside a space which is in itself, inherently deep inside space. Some of my favorite places in the caves have been the furthest sections that one can access. In there, all motion stops. It is as if there were a fermata in the signature of the world I would find it there.

The caves are unique spaces. There is no horizon in a cave. No place upon which to rest one's eyes to steady oneself. Instead, there is a narrowing down of vision to that which is caught in the web of light you have cast. In a way, you are the source of your vision and the act of choosing where to put your gaze is a continuously conscious act, not one left to randomness, laziness, or chance.

I find I become profoundly conscious of where I am in space when I am in a cave in a way that does not happen so much in the outer world. At any given time, within the cave, I know where my head is. I know where my head is in relation to stalactites hanging down from ceilings, or crevasses, or edges of alcoves beneath which I've crouched. I know where my feet are all the time. I am aware that the ground is smooth or uneven, or that if I do not place my feet just so, I will slide down the clay floor into a bear pit and then have a very hard time climbing back out. I am far more aware than I am in the outer world that each step has a consequence and one that I have to consciously measure and choose, and as such my world becomes reduced to the radius of space around my body that is roughly the same length as my arm. I have to know that arm's length in a way that is about safety, not because I am worried about my own safety, but I am desperately worried about the safety of the cave. I need to protect it from me.

The lines I study were drawn in the soft walls of caves as much as 40,000 years ago. In some caves, the walls are still soft, like talc or wet concrete, and in others a thin layer of clay rests where it arrived after one or many floods in the distant past. If I were to brush my fingers against the talc (which is called most poetically, moonmilk) or the clay, it would leave a mark.

As my goal is to look at the marks other people left behind, the last thing I want to do is add my own. Worse, still, many of these flutings are also near pieces of artwork we recognize and treasure. Gracile deer leaping from the wall, tender muzzles of reindeer with soft eyes, thick shouldered mammoth who've been asleep for 20,000 years, and then me. So, no, I do not want my hands to come close to them and yet many times when I am close in to the wall to look at and measure lines, I am aware that I am as close to them as I was once to my husband in the moment before kissing him. It's that intimate. And perhaps, like my mammoths, and reindeer, that moment of intimacy is now for me, too, only a remnant of the distant past. But in the warm light of the torch, where that is all I can see, that time feels closer than it does when I am out beneath in the wider arc of the sky.

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My father and grandfather both built darkrooms into their homes. Both ardent photographers, the darkrooms were central to their psyches as both an escape from their overly talkative wives, and also a place to bring to light the photos which occupied such a large place in their personal geographies. If my father were to be bottled as a perfume scent he would be a heady mix of Dektol and formaldehyde crossed with Old Spice aftershave and Kent cigarettes. Perhaps not the blend that would win friends and influence people.

The smell of Dektol has probably disappeared from the world in the instant world of digital photography and instant visual gratification. For me, I'm sorry that we have lost something of the mystery that came out of the darkness of the darkroom.

I'm glad to remember then the sensation of having to know by feel how to open a film canister and develop the film in darkness. Something done by feel, by touch, without the need for sight. And then, there were the next stages, done after the long strands of film had been pegged on a washing line, and the contact sheets had been made to decide what was truly worth developing. Everything came down to weighing up the relationship between darkness and light and knowing that to have one always meant sacrificing something of the other.

In a windowless room an image was projected the enlarger onto the whiteness of photo paper and then dipped in the chemicals until magically it appeared from the whiteness into the dark. There are perhaps few things in life that move in that direction from the empty space of the pure white sheet to catch instead the shadows and the darkness. We all fancied ourselves Ansel Adams, a family hero, hoping that our contrasts between our whites and our blacks could be as pure as his. They never were, but in the darkness of the darkroom we were, in our own way daily alchemists of darkness, shadow, and light.

I do not remember the sensation of absolute darkness in the darkroom as the giant square timer we used to know how long to soak things glowed in the dark, and a single red light bulb cast an eerie glow over the enlarger and the pans of chemicals. When I think back on it now, I wonder when else in life are we ever bathed in red light except beneath stained glass windows in cathedrals. Though, on the night my husband died, the hospice nurse thinking she was kind, had brought in a red lamp and had bathed the room in a red light which I can only imagine she thought should rightly accompany the sound of a heart, like a wave, breaking against the darkness.

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In the caves, I have the unique privilege of moving in and through these places at my own pace. When I have to be a tourist at a cave I am often unnerved by being encouraged to move along too quickly to fit the time frame of a 45 minute visit. The caves have their own time. They insist on their own time. There is a requirement of sweeping a light along a space in front of you and having it come clear for a moment and then recede again. One moves in waves.

So one of the aspects I note in the caves is that time stops there or slows to an unknowableness. I am one of those people who instinctively knows roughly what time it is all the time. In the cave, though, an hour will go by, or two, and I will have thought it to be 10 or 15 minutes. I don't know what accounts for this slowing of time for it seems I am taking in so much but it may be that it is being taken in at depth. I am seeing all there is to see. I don't know whenever that is the case in the world of light?

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After Kevin died I didn't fear darkness as much as I feared immobility. I was afraid that the space I was in I would inhabit forever. I was endlessly asking anyone who would listen, "where am I on this map of grief?" as I wanted to know how long I was going to be in the woods and how much of it was I going to have to traverse on my

knees. I wanted to know where I was so I would know how much energy I needed to endure this.

But I never believed in an absolute darkness there.

My hell is not black or deeply dark but is grey. It is most often peopled with academics who give the illusion of passion but are actually strange soul sucking creatures who have traded the theoretical for the heart and yet insist, often in very beautiful language that they have not.

My one week in deepest hell took place in Victoria, British Columbia the June after Kevin died. I was at an environmental literature conference on a college campus that was temporarily overrun with black and white rabbits. It was surreal to continually go into sessions in dark rooms discussing nature while outside the campus was positively breeding and hopping before our eyes. It was the only conference I've ever been to where one of the keynotes believed he was the Elton John of Environmental Lit and gave a paper on why we should embrace the Apocalyptic vision of the future since it was already here in his mind. He thought movies should be even more violent than they already are so they could mirror reality and thought this especially essential for children's viewing. I secretly hoped he would be attacked by black bunnies on his way back to his dorm room one night. I would have slipped baby carrots into the pockets of his shiny leather post modern suit if I could have gotten close enough but he was protected by his eco entourage.

In almost every session, I fell asleep. As soon as the speaker began, I was out. I tried everything to stay awake but it wasn't possible except the day Jan Zwicky read her poetry. I realized things that were pure and light still spoke to me, if they were pared down to the essentials, as her poetry was. She, through a simple poem about the joy found in doing dishes, fought back the grey.

We went whale watching and saw no whales. A giant wave came up on the ship and doused one person, me. A kind woman who saw I was trapped in a palpable misery told me that Issak Dinsen had written that there were only three things in the world that held salt – blood, tears, and the ocean. Salt was what was there when the liquid had burned away. I held onto that thought and the pared down poetry through a long painful week of grey. If one waited long enough, the slow liquid of the grey world would drain away leaving crystals of something pure. I heard that. Or I made it up.

But while I felt like I was a dinner plate for a whole host of demons that week, I never once felt that I was in the space of darkness. Greyness, yes. Torpor and immobility, sure. A place where passion had drained from the world leaving behind the clown faces of illusion, absolutely. But not the depth of darkness.

I wonder now if it is because darkness does not frighten me. In darkness one can always see the contrast of light when it comes. In the greyness that is not so.

A perpetual grey is a nothing space. There is nothing to see or not see except in gradients and that world becomes so small as to never know where moments of change happen, and perhaps all things become relative instead of being able to see what is clear, light, true.

Is it any wonder Wittgenstein came to Connemara to see something clearly in Europe's last pool of Darkness?

If I want to know what is true in life -- what is light -- is it any wonder that I need the absolute darkness to see the light so clearly?

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Each time I have moved in my life it has required a deep re-orientation. Moving to England required learning to drive left handed stick shift and to change sides of the road. At the same time I was learning this, I was also learning a mirror form in tai chi where I was literally learning the exact opposite of a form I had been doing for ten years. For many years the effect of re-siding myself was unnerving, until I moved to New Zealand where it somehow became fluid and now it doesn't matter to me which side I am on as I am equally facile. I don't know how this happened within my brain but it became smooth.

When I moved to the Southern Hemisphere it was the stars that required me to realign myself. I had come from places of tremendous light pollution so the idea of living someplace where the Milky Way was so visible was a great part of the allure. My home is called Te Mangaroa which is the Maori name for the Milky Way as its presence was so present that it needed to be called out.

The first time I saw the night sky in New Zealand I had the distinct feeling of sliding off the earth as none of the stars looked familiar. These were the stars of another planet for sure as I knew *my* night sky, and only the seven sisters of the Pleides seemed to still be familiar friends, though there they went by the name of Matiriki there and their rising signified the Maori new year. In time as my eyes adjusted and I saw my old friend Orion standing on his head. Gone were the great bears of the sky, the crown of Casseopia, the Scorpion's tail.

Instead, for solace, I had the coal sacks. In the midst of the bands of the southern hemisphere's view of the Milky Way are places of absolute darkness where there are no stars. They are so striking that they appear like spilled ink against the white backdrop of the night sky. The Aborigines of Australia saw them as part of the great emu in the sky. The first European explorers, coming across them as early as 1499 called them the Coal Sacks. Astronomers say that they are a dark nebulae in the constellation Southern Cross whose dust obscures the light of the Milky Way. I say they are a taste of absolute darkness in the night sky.

There was something quiet about them to me. I befriended them as my first familiars in the sky there. They are still the first place my eyes go when I encounter the wash of the Milky Way. Perhaps they are the great void or the nothingness of space, but because they are bounded by a cascade of stars, they do not seem lonely, only a pause, a four bar rest, in the riot of the sky.

Patrick tells me that he thinks absolute darkness is the visual equivalence of silence. I agree. Like silence, I am fairly certain that there is a difference in the encounter between one chosen and one enforced. It may be in those defenseless places like silence and darkness than intention is amplified because the usual layers of buffering and distraction are removed. Solitary confinement kills people. I know I starve without human touch. And yet when I willingly choose to go into absolute darkness of the caves I do not fear what I fill find there for I have already chosen the space as one in which I am consciously exploring instead of relegated.

I spoke to a friend who meditates regularly about my interest in absolute darkness. He told me that his only internal experience of it was 'the void.' "I love the void when I get there," he told me, which I once thought was a story of avoiding life, but now I think he must be right. If you know that your visit to these places is not forever and that you are not stuck there, then it is a place of peace. Or it can be.

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Helen Keller wrote in her memoir of her childhood, "Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbour was. "Light! give me light!"

was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.“

A white darkness she called it. Is that what the blind see? Does it matter what color the light is or simply that there is always light in places we imagine to be the definition of absolute darkness? I don't know.

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A few weekends ago, I visited Newgrange, the enormous passage tomb site in County Meath, with a group of rock art specialists. Rock Art is a good discipline for cultivating humility as every presentation at the conference ended with, “We don't really have any idea what it means...” which I thought a useful experience for academics who so often think they know what they mean, but probably don't. Here, in the face of stones which were quarried far further afield and transported through no doubt difficult means, there is a sense of purposefulness, but in looking at the artwork pecked into them, the overriding sense of “why” continually gives way to a feeling of “we have no idea.”

It rained briefly and then the sun came out brilliantly, which, according to these rock art specialists, is the most ideal way to view the rock art as for in the brief moment of sunlight the designs are illuminated against the otherwise grey canvas of stone. Spirals emerge, doubles, and singles, giant owl eyes, and chunky lozenges, chevrons with sharp tips and undulating serpentine.

Our guide cheerfully encouraged us to enter into the passage tomb warning that the ceiling is low and the walls grow close and narrow. Those who are claustrophobic or think they might be were encouraged to go last so that they may flee first. In a time honored guide trick she exaggerated the words around darkness, closeness, tight enclosed space, and tomb to make sure that those who were having visceral reactions to the words themselves could be identified and were kindly encouraged to perhaps stay outside in the sunshine.

A smaller group entered into the tomb. We slid past the entrance stones and indeed the walls narrowed around us until we emerged into a circular chamber. In alcoves on three sides were drawings, anchored by basin like stones on the floor carved in even hands. In hushed tones she tells us of the winter solstice mornings when for 3 days at dawn, the sun shines through the upper passage of the site making a perfect line of buttery light illuminating the chamber. Thirty thousand people a year compete in a lottery each year to be among the hundred who will witness this miracle each year.

To give us a sense of the experience she extinguishes the lights and leaves us for a few moments in almost complete darkness. As ever, I want to pay attention to what I will see.

Beige.

What?

Beige. A sort of flat light the same color as concrete. The light in my eyes doesn't move. Just a patch here and there of brownish grey.

Gone are the blues I see in the caves in France and Spain. All I can think is that I can feel that this is a built environment. It does not have the curves and contours of the insides of a cave that was carved by a river, but instead has the rough hewnness of stone brought from one place to another and placed with great precision by human hands in a pattern to form a perfect dome.

As the lights come back up there is a sense of illumination in the chamber, but moreso of warmth. The color of the sun against the stone walls. The beginning of things. My caves, never experience this. The only light they see are our small torches

and in that it is fleeting. The black horse in the back chamber of Hornos de la Pena is never warmed by a winter morning's sun.

I ask the guide what she sees in the darkness since she does this tour many times a day.

"It changes. It depends on my mood, the people in the group, the weather. What I had for lunch."

I'm intrigued. I tell her of the blues I see in the caves and that it has been a consistent experience for me. I share that I saw only a beige or greyish light here, not at all as alive as what I see in the caves.

"Ah that's because you're in your place there and here I'm in mine. Sometimes, when I have migraines, I see those same chevrons that you see over there. In fact, many people think that they signs and symbols may have emerged from those kinds of experiences."

I agree, but find myself more taken with the question of how much our internal state influences what we see in complete darkness. I had imagined that to be a somewhat empirical kind of question but if what she said is true, then it is as much about resonance as it is about vision.

And while Newgrange was interesting, she was right that it wasn't a space that resonated for me.

But it does leave me wondering if in the darkness our inner world is made outer and stripped of the distraction of sight, we see instead what we feel.

Perhaps for me, that looks like long strands of blue light.

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On Thursday morning I had tea with Robin Dunbar, a biological anthropologist who studies evolution and human group sizes. He has spent a lifetime trying to understand the ways in which we, as humans, come together and come apart. When I ask him of his current work he tells me it is all about endorphins – as he is trying to work out what was the trigger for hominid brain sizes to grow at various times in the historical record.

Laughter, he tells me, is the key to it all. When we laugh together we bond, we reinforce our relationships, our sense of belonging. It is ancient to us. A vocal calling we did before we were this variety of humans. We were like wolves howling together under the moon. So today, when we sing, dance synchronously, make music together, feel the pulse of a bass line right in our chests, we tie into something deep in our core. Something that has been there for hundreds of thousands of years. Something that came to us at the same time 400,000 years ago that we began to gather together around the fire at night.

Perhaps that is it then. Robin tells me that we associate our feeling of endorphins with euphoria or joy. I think of it as the sensation of fullness of being – that sheer delight in existing.

And then it hits me what else he has said. That our shared laughter, our shared song, and our experience of joy within that all came together in us at the same time. The moment we found we could make fire.

Is it any wonder then that we associate so deeply the warm glow of a fire, the warding off of darkness, and belonging.

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These are after all, feelings. Resonances. Something we all experience but almost never see.

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I tell Robin of my interest in darkness in the caves (to which he laughs because it is so obvious) and I share with him my stories of the acoustics of the space and the colors of the darkness. He tells me I should look at the concept of Blindsight, which is the capacity to detect motion and to 'see' with the unconscious part of our brain even when we have lost complete sight.

This is perhaps the ultimate form of the brain seeing in the darkness where even without any hope of translating what the eye is absorbing, the brain can still understand if there is motion, or if everything has gone deadly still.

Blindsight seems to be that part of ourselves that it is smarter than we are. The part that ignores the evidence of what we see for something else that has always been there.

It must be the part of us that keeps going even when the evidence tells us that there's nothing ahead. It is the part of us in the midst of the deepest of darks that knows that there is and always will be light again. That isn't the terrain of what the eye can or can't see. That is simply the terrain of faith. Not faith in anything external per se, but a faith which perhaps explains why I see blue light in absolute darkness .

For as far as I can tell, the darkness tells me best that there is always more here than what my eyes can see.

And I, for one, am most grateful for that.

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In Gargas cave I used to ask Kevin to sing. The cave is a beautiful space of long crevassed ceilings and a white calcite floor. Handprints of red, black, yellow and

white emerge from the walls giving the distinct impression of being waved at by a crowd of people who've vanished for a moment like Alice's Cheshire cat and have left behind their hands instead of their smiles.

The cave is acoustically pure, having been formed by the harmonics of an underground river curving and eddying long ago in time. From the center of the cave you can whisper and be heard at the entrance gate.

In the furthest section of the cave are three chambers nestled into each other. The outer chamber is half the size of this room. On the walls are engravings of animals one atop another. Long lines etched into the dark clay walls where bulls and bison leap from the walls alongside long maned horses and a thin necked goose.

Climbing into a smaller space the next chamber has a long smooth benchlike space and a place in the wall where it is as if people had dug out the clay with their fingers.

The last chamber can only be reached when it hasn't rained for puddles form at its feet and make it hard to crawl under the wall to come into the space. But on a dry day a single person can come into the heart of the cave.

There, in a round space the size of a table the walls pull upwards into a chimney. On the wall in front of you is a Roman Centurian's SPQR and the wings of an eagle. Below it is a Neolithic dagger. To the left, a Paleolithic horse with its mane blowing in the wind, and finally one single nineteenth century bit of graffiti.

I asked Kevin to go into the heart chamber of the cave to sing to me. His voice was deep and warm honed from years of church choirs. With no one but us to hear him, he sang the way you do when you're alone in the car.

I sat first in the outer chamber and then in the chamber of the engravings in absolute darkness.

He sang Amazing Grace.

It hit me with a force right in my chest that I can still feel as I write this today.

And long before I ever knew I would lose him, I wept.

For sometimes in the darkness, you truly do see and feel it all.

(What follows is a story that has little to do with all of this, or perhaps a lot. (I may or may not read it).

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Seven summers ago on a late July night the Thames flooded. I was away on the other side of the world for work while Kevin was home with my stepdaughter Miriam. The doctor had refused to give him chemotherapy while I was gone because she didn't think Miriam would take good enough of him. Miriam was a good carer, in truth, though not then, as she was just terribly afraid. And when afraid we all have the potential to default to the worst versions of ourselves. Hers scolded and shook her finger at her father and demanded that he do what he was told. She mistook a dying man for a defiant man. It happens.

I came home just as they were letting the first vehicles back into the city. Miriam took this to mean they were letting vehicles back out of the city and she fled on the first available bus. She would have jumped a canal boat had one floated by. The only one we saw lay upended like a dead whale in the middle of the river helpless to the current. That one, unlike Miriam, wasn't going anywhere.

It was a strikingly beautiful evening and once Miriam had fled and Kevin, with tears in his eyes, had told me the story of what he remembered of the weekend very much like a small boy with a skinned knee telling me that he didn't understand why his

daughter had become so angry at him for not eating when he couldn't eat and that she had shook her finger at him, but once spent of his story, he finally fell asleep, his cheeks still wet, and I walked out the back garden and onto the footpath by the Thames. The river was inches from cresting over the stone wall. There was something compelling about its motion as if it were a muscle flexing itself for the first time and finding it surprised to know it was supple and strong.

I crossed Folly Bridge and began to walk down the footpath on the south side of the Thames. It did not go far and at the nadir of the Hertford bridge I stopped because the other side of it was completely under water. As was the meadow.

Christchurch meadow had become a boulevard of water. Burst from its bank the Thames or should I say Isis, absorbed the wide footpath and flowed up into the trees doubling the width of river. Though no humans could be seen, I saw two blue herons walking through the new riverbed, the park finally to themselves.

Though I know it is not possible, in my memory, I am sure they were walking hand in hand in the long shadows of late summer light.