

Tuesday's Child Monday's child fair of face

Tuesday's child is full of grace

Wednesday's child is full of woe

Thursday's child has far to go

Friday's child works hard for their living

Saturday's child is loving and giving

But the child that's born on the Sabbath day is bonnie and blithe and good and gay.

The world stands still in the aftermath of the dawn. The woman lying in the heather, knowing better, nevertheless chooses to accept this as a gesture of appreciation for her artwork. She lies flat on her stomach with her chin resting on the bare skin of her forearms and stares out between the limbs of her tripod at the changing textures of the landscape she has just attempted to fix on film. It is good. As a culmination of three months' worth of early mornings, a frighteningly large proportion of her savings blown on a lens and an amateur's stab at astronomy, it is very good indeed. If it comes out. If the view on the film is anything at all like the reality and if she can do in the darkroom the things that she needs to do then it might, indeed, have been worth the time and the effort. And if not, then it is good to have had something to get up for in the mornings.

The dawn coughs and restarts. Larks and pippets cast up, singing to the vault of the sky. Crows add a counterpoint, a verse for the earth. A buzzard swings out over the sea, mewling like a gull. On the moor, rabbits tuck tight to the heather and keep eating. Nothing stops living for long, not even for art, still less for death, or the wish for death. There is something to be learned from that. The woman draws a wax-cloth pack from the front pocket of her camera bag, unrolls her gear and rolls up a joint; plenty of weed, not too much tobacco. She is going to give up the tobacco. Today. Now. This is the last one. Later this afternoon, when the negatives are drying, she will take her bike and go down to Murdo's place and buy a hash pipe like the one Grace had; a small one, hand carved, less than an inch long, with curving goddess figures in mother-of-pearl inlaid along the stem and a bowl you could fit on the end of your little finger. With that, she will smoke only weed. In time, she will give up even on that. She licks the paper and rolls it down, finds a book of matches in a pocket, lights up and lets the swirl of smoke mix with the mood of the morning. Life is good. She could throw the bag, the tripod, the camera and the film down the cliff and into the loch and still it would be good. This feeling is new. She will hoard and bring it out for inspection, later, when she has forgotten how she found it.

She rolls over onto one side, props herself up on an elbow and contemplates a different view. Away to the east, the ben rises up out of the dark night of the valleys. The new light of the sun catches the damp mass of the pines and the paler lie of the bracken above the tree line. Between them lies a flat sea of heather, like a blanket flipped in the wind, rolling gently as it falls. A single tree stands in the middle distance, long dead and petrified in the cold and wind and rain of a dozen winters. It reaches up in silhouette towards the lightening sky and, as she watches, a handful of jackdaws gathers to meet on the upper branches. The image is stark. It would look good in black and white. She

fumbles in her bag and draws out another plate, slipping it into her pocket as she stands. The lens change is smooth, the new one comes to hand without thinking, the right length for the shot. She has spent years with this camera and she knows it as she knows nothing else in the impermanent blur of her life. She swivels the base plate on the tripod and dips in under the cloth to make the final adjustments that will frame the tree in the centre of the image. Viewed from here, the world is inverted, spun on its axis, upside down and left to right. A rootless tree grows down from a dark ridge of sky. To the right, the sky falls to the floor in an endless curtain. She comes out from under the hood and stands with her hands on her hips, head tilted, examining her composition. With the tree in the centre, the ben hogs the whole of the left hand side of the picture; a rising wall of meaningless greys. She turns the camera five degrees to the south, angles the lens up and re-frames. Now the tree is in the bottom right and the lightening streaks of the sky fill the rest. Tongues of orange flame seep out through long, thin knifings of red. Streaks of saffron bleed over both. This needs colour. The film plate in her pocket is changed for a new one, the lens stays the same. She slides under the cloth and tunes the focus to the bird on the topmost branch of the tree. She checks the light, sets the aperture and the estimates the time. In this light even with the lens wide open, the exposure will be long, close to half a second. There are possibilities in that. In the time it takes to slide the plate into the back of the camera, the idea takes hold. Smiling, she steps back to a place where she can't possibly rock the tripod and, with the trigger release grasped between finger and thumb of her left hand, she curves her right hand round the side of her mouth, takes in a breath and hurls it out with all the cathartic release of the morning;

'Hey!'

The back door to the cottage hangs open, the way she left it. She backs the Land Rover into the space at the end of the byre, unpacks her kit and lays it on the weed-crazed tarmac. The dog is there at her side before she pulls the keys from the ignition, all tousled hair and enthusiasm and questions. She hitches her bag on her shoulder and he lopes ahead of her down the path through the weeds and the remains of last year's garden. She talks to him as they go - 'Yes, it was fine, thank you. It went well. I'm sorry I couldn't take you. Later maybe, when the sun's over the hill and it's not so hot,' - and gives him a lens bag to carry, looping the cord over his head and through his collar in case the unthinkable happens and he drops it. He doesn't drop much, but a lens is a lens and they are not easy to replace even when the money is rolling in for each picture. Which it isn't, of course, or she wouldn't still be here.

He follows her up to the darkroom and waits outside the door as she unpacks the bag and puts everything where it belongs; the camera goes back in the box it arrived in, tucked into an alcove built out of pine and lined with raw silk that was a present from Murdo the last time he came back from abroad. The lenses go in the lens-drawer, one in each section, fitted to the millimetre, an artisan's dream. It took a weekend, just measuring and cutting the wood for that drawer and every time she buys a new lens she re-builds the inner sections. There is pleasure in the making of things and it pays, in the long run to take care of the kit. In the beginning they shared that, she and Grace, as if the building and making were part of the attempt to mould two into one, a blurring of the boundaries between life and creation and living. Later it became a joke, sharp-toothed and vicious, a needle to test out the weak spots. By the end it was simply yet one more point of friction.

The woman lays the new lens in its place and closes the drawer. Something hard

presses against her thigh, a nudging insistence on the seam of her jeans. The dog has muscled in behind her. She turns and he grins up, daring her to tell him no. He is never allowed near the developing tanks – too many hairs in places that don't need hairs - but he can tell when she is in an indulgent mood and he will push as far as he thinks he can go. She takes the lens bag from him and makes him stay while she takes the films through into the processing room. She considers doing them here and now but these things are better not done in a hurry. Instead, she lays them on the side by the enlargers and shoos the dog out and closes the doors and leads him back down the stairs to the kitchen.

The kitchen is warm, warmer than it was in the pre-dawn grey of her leaving. Morning sunlight floods in through the window, picking out the ingrained honey of the woodwork, warming the sandstone flags of the floor, setting fire to the copper fittings on the range. It took weeks of work to get the colours and the spaces and the angles properly balanced and all of it was done on faith. Grace made her block the window against the morning sun so that they worked in darkness and by electric light all the way through until the last drawer handle was in place, then they got up early one morning and took the boards down and waited to see if the sun would be what they wanted it to be. It did and it was grand, but it was the full moon, later in the month that made the real magic so that they undressed each other and stood by the window, letting the light of it weld them together in the places that touched. There were a great many places that touched that night, all of them changed by the moon. Even in all the known, long-travelled cycles of biology this night was different. It came in the taste of her, in the fresh, metallic edge of lunar madness; in the sound of her voice; deep and guttural, like a lioness calling her cubs; in the feel of the hands, tight in her hair, tightening, gripping again and again and then the final hard-held release. And then afterwards, standing again, kissing and between the breaths, her voice; 'I'm sorry ... your hair ... I didn't mean to ... did it hurt?' so that she could smile and shake her head and run a hand through the hair and say; 'No. It didn't hurt. You never hurt me.' And it was true, then.

Later, the moon moved round and the kitchen fell into darkness. They poured wine and drank it and climbed the stairs and then the ladder to the cramped crows nest of the loft where there was barely room on the floor for the futon and no room at all to stand up but where the roof was one long window, pitched at thirty degrees and facing south so that it caught the full light of every star and planet that crossed the sky. They came together again with all the urgency of a first night but with five years of practice that knew the needs and the rhythms and the pressures of each so that two did, in the end, become one.

She lay awake at dawn the next morning, listening to the starlings fight for space on the roof-ridge and the kettle hiss on the hob down below as Grace moved round making tea. She sat up and turned round, fitting her back to the glass of the roof, leaning forward with the angle of it, revelling in the hard, cold pressure on the fine-tuned nerves of her skin. She tipped her chin on her shoulder and watched the leading edge of the sun carve its way out of the earth, far out on the shoulder of the ben. The colours of it hit her the way the wine had hit her blood; a light, effervescent sparkle of possibilities. She reached for her notebook and drew out the shapes of it, tried to think of names that would make sense of the colours, playing with titles for when the piece was done. Then, by chance, caught by a noise on the stairway, she turned to the west and what she saw there left her mute. Out on the far edge of the world, the moon kissed the sea; a swelling sphere, drinking her fill of misted grey water, crisped at the edges with silver. In all the years she

had lived there, it was the first time she had seen the twin bodies so close, so big, so sharp, so perfectly balanced on the horizon. It was not an image to let go lightly. She bent her head to the paper, sketching, and she was still there, crouched forward, hugging her knees to her chest when Grace came up with the tea. It wasn't the same then, but there was enough left to show her what it had been and they drank the tea together in celebration of the miracle of light; the ultimate union of opposites, night brought into day, heat into cold, fire into water, Grace into Sarah and Sarah into Grace. All barriers gone. It was the best of all possible mornings and when they left the bed and retired downstairs for lunch, she had the title that she needed to complete the piece.

With time, she found that the magic didn't happen monthly, nor even necessarily annually. She read academic papers on the declination of the moon, on the changing clarity of the atmosphere and the optical illusions of space and light. She spoke to the older folk in the village, those who made a living in the days before meteorology progressed from art into science and learned from them how to predict the weather at dawn, how the rise of the sun brought with it the first layers of cloud and the phase of the moon made the sea give up more or less water so that those clouds were more or less full as they rose. The making of the piece became an obsession, a quiet one at first, shadowed in other work, immersed in other, better, reasons for living, but the seed was sown that morning, the wraith released and she can, when she tries, hold it responsible for everything that happened afterwards. She may have banished it now –the wraith and its aftermath – with the work of the morning. It is worth a try. And even if not, it is time she went back up to the loft again and spent her nights in a real bed. The sofa is not the same. Tonight she will go up. Or in a week or two, when the moon is old and no longer spends its nights staring in through her window.

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The world is pitch black. Darkness enfolds her. This is what it is to be blind. Her fingers locate the things she needs without sight; the tanks, the tongs, the bottle of rinse. The timer sits to the left of the tanks, pre-set to the nearest tenth of a second. The tanks are warmed and the temperature of the solutions held steady to within a fraction of a degree. In this alchemy, precision matters and she finds peace in the discipline of it. She feels for the two plates, opening the second shot first because it is the least important and if she were to make a mistake, she would prefer it to be with this one. At her touch, the plate hinges open. The film slides into the placental depths of the developer. The timer ticks and she stands suspended in the no-time of waiting until the chime of its ending. All that moves is the tank, tilted and released, once every fifteen seconds, to keep the solutions moving. The vapours rise and mix and she changes solutions. The blackness begins to seep into her head and her eyes see colours in the swirl of smells. Developer is amber, the colour of honey. The stop bath bites like lemon zest. She moves the film to the final tank to fix and, for this one, she counts the time in her head; one thousand and one, one thousand and two She could re-set the timer but by now the discipline is beginning to wear thin. The act of counting makes her wait when the dull monotony of the clockwork might give her an excuse to break the rules and look too soon. ... One thousand and thirty. She leans over and pulls at the cord beside the door. Smoked amber light pushes back the dark. The negative floats in the pale plastic of the tray. She takes the tongs and lifts it out, rinsing distilled water along the length and then holds it up to the light. Firecracker fragments of clear film explode out of the blurred haze of a sunrise. In all the chaos of crow-flight action, the tree is crisply, perfectly still. It is good. She has not made a mistake.

The remaining two films are more precious; the sun and the moon, the moor and the sea, waiting to be merged into one single piece. If she can do it. She locks the door, leaving the negatives on the side and goes down to stand outside the kitchen door and roll another joint. There is more tobacco in this one, perhaps half of the mix. She needs something to take the edge off the waiting and the weed makes the lightless space more interesting. The dog lies on the grass with his back to her. He is attacking a cow's femur that she brought back from the village three days ago. By now, this is nothing more than a displacement activity; there is no useful flesh left to be torn from the bone, no ligaments unchewed, no possible access to the marrow. She speaks his name; 'Finn' and snaps her fingers. He looks up and away again, too quickly. He doesn't hold with weed. She nips out the joint, puts the roach in her pocket and turns in toward the kitchen.

Back in the darkroom, she drops the twin films into the tank. There is a challenge to holding the discipline against the expanding space of her head. Ego and alter ego fight for control. The temptation is always to rush it, to skip out a step, to open the door early, to let in the light and watch it fade to black in front of her eyes and know that the wraith is still loose and will be so for another year at least. She does none of these things and when the negatives come out of the final tank, they are perfect - as close as she can tell with the emulsion still wet. She clips them up to dry, switches on the top light and clears the surfaces ready for printing. She is light-headed and her body feels empty.

She works through the rest of the day. The magic of printing holds her to now in a way nothing else can do, possibly in a way nothing else has ever done. Torn fragments of images emerge from the dark. Test strips and partial prints litter the counters. After a while, she abandons the timer and counts everything in her head, no longer to keep the discipline but because she has become a part of the process, the breath of her count, the organic expansions and contractions of time are as necessary as the wavelength of light, the correct concentrations of developer, the fixer. Once, she finds she has forgotten to breathe for the length of an exposure and she stands still, drawing in chemical air, shuddering as the crowded oxygen struggles to fill the far corners of her lungs. The last lift of weed drains from her system and is barely missed.

Once again, she completes the tree first. It has grown since the moor, the reds are more violent, the yellows cut more deeply, the tree is burned to full black with the crow's flight ghosting above it. And yet there is more. Fresh colours seep in at the edges, new things that she didn't see in the original out on the moor. With experimentation, she makes a second print, bleeding away the fire and the sulphur and finding their opposites in a series of pale lilacs and pastel blues. When she is done, she has fire and no-fire; before and after; another merging of opposites. They need a better title than that. She passes both prints through the dryer and props them side by side on a ledge at eye height, away to the left where she can see but not look at them, where the feel of each can enter her head. Every picture needs a title as the final act of creation. Some arrive complete, with their names in place. Others take time and the grasp of the unconscious. She leaves them and makes an effort not to think.

The remaining print takes longer. Before starting, she goes down to the kitchen and makes a meal that could either be lunch or dinner. In the absence of smoke, Finn is amenable to bribery with the crust end of a loaf and a smear of butter. He sees the change in her and follows her up to the darkroom afterwards, lying across the doorway so that she can feel the presence of him as she works. She is pleased with that. It is

good to have company on a long job and there is no question but that this one will take her through to the night. The birth started at dawn. It is fitting that its delivery should follow through to dusk and beyond. She is in a different space now, without the need for experimentation. Here, there are no unexpected colours, no hidden reality. There is instead, a precision, an exactness that drives her beyond the bounds of her customary standards. She seeks a printer's dream of colours to carry her one step beyond what the eye and light can achieve. The sun must be a certain luminous shade of gold, the moon a specific radiance in silver. The moor and the sea must merge in a ghost-light of greys and muted greens. Heather must sprinkle the land in just this ratio of lilac to white, waves carve these static monuments in steel and phosphorescence. She has carried the potential of this in her head for twenty four months and nothing short of perfection will do.

The wraith is ravenous. For two years she has starved it, blocking out the yearning with sex or smoke or drink or a mix of all three. Later, with Grace gone, excesses of work and inadequacies of eating filled the obvious gap. In extremis there was always the promise of death to buy peace for a time. Now, as she works, she finds that it feeds on body fluids; on the sweat that pools beneath her arms and in the small of her back, on the tears that prick her eyelids and make tracks along the side of her nose. In the beginning, she can believe she has breathed too deeply of the stop-bath. Later as time flows back to the first morning and rewinds in a stuttering, jerky reprise of the discarded years, she gives up the lie. By evening, she feeds it with a wanton, wilful carelessness, building six dimensional memories of taste and touch and smell, of the burr of a voice and the catch of light in an iris, the electric sweep of hair down the full length of her back, the sucking vacuum in her diaphragm that swells to bursting but never peaks and breaks. Tonight, if she works carefully, she can break it. By morning, she could be free.

She finishes after midnight. She could go to bed now, knowing that the final print is dry, that the benches are clear and clean, that there is nothing left but to mount and name the three prints that line her wall. She does not go to bed. The mounting takes no time. This, she could do in her sleep, were her sleep ever so ordered. Knife, straight edge and card combine to make a crisp, anally perfect set of lines at perpendicular angles. She keeps the mount edges narrow. None of these images needs the emphasis of width.

At the end, there is only the naming to bring everything together. The last piece has had its title since the first morning. Tuesday's Child; full of Grace, because they had been, on that first morning, both her and the picture. Now, though, there are three prints lined up on the bench before her. She moves them round, changing the order. The trees are in the way, a second reflection of fire and dark. In her planning, the sun and the moon balance perfectly on the horizon. She had never expected this piece to be part of a trio.

She switches off the safe-light and opens the door to let in fresh air. The world outside is as dark as the room around her. The house creaks with the changing touch of the night. The dog comes in to lie on the floor at her feet, twitching dreams of rabbits, whining questions and their answers, none of them for her. She has her pen and her white card, waiting to make the thing whole. If needs be, she can destroy the two unwanted children and keep only the perfection of the central print. Tomorrow, she can take it out into the world and it will be seen. This piece alone will re-make her name. It will be photographed and displayed. Copies of it will circulate; maybe only a limited edition, maybe, if she is feeling profligate, an unlimited edition sold on the mass market and hanging in half the homes of the land. Her one condition will be that the title remains with the picture. It

doesn't need her signature, it is too obviously hers, but it needs the name so that somewhere, sometime, Grace will see it and know what it means. At that point, the wraith will leave her. This has been its promise from the beginning.

She sits until dawn. As the sun breaks afresh through the mountain, she takes all three prints and carries them up the ladder to the loft. It is a day past full moon and the symmetry is no longer perfect. The moon lags behind, not touching the sea, the colours are not as they were. She lays the prints out on the bed in the order they have held for the past three hours: sun-burst crow tree, sun-and-moon, pastel crow tree; fire fading to nothing. It has not been possible to separate them. She has the integrity left to see that and to know that the old plans must be discarded. She draws out her pouch. The wraith keens, sharply. She unrolls her gear and rolls up a joint; plenty of weed, not too much tobacco. She will give up the tobacco but not today, it is too soon. In time, when the keening is at its lowest ebb, she picks up her pen. The piece will be a single unit made of three prints in the order in which they are now lying. The new title belongs to all three. She leans over to keep her hand steady and presses the tip to the paper. The words flow as if they were there all along with a finality that makes them right. This is what creation is about. The wraith breaks through the weed as she writes but there is nothing she can do about this. At the end of it, she lays her pen on the bed and backs down the ladder to the bathroom to be sick. If she chooses, she can believe this is the weed. Upstairs, the white card lies under the central picture, the words balance in perfect measured copperplate: Yesterday • Today • Tomorrow; the story of her life.