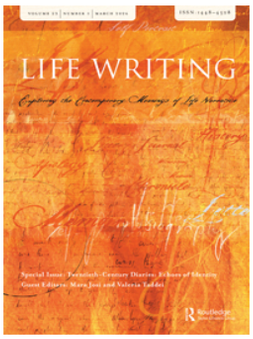

Life Writing

ISSN: 1448-4528 (Print) 1751-2964 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rlwr20

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To cite this article: Joe Moran (17 Mar 2026): The Light of Our Lives, Life Writing, DOI: 10.1080/14484528.2026.2643379

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2026.2643379

LIFE WRITING
https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2026.2643379

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The Light of Our Lives

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ABSTRACT
This personal essay explores an overlooked aspect of life writing: light. I explore the different kinds of light in my own life and the life of my grandmother, who was born and raised on an island off the west coast of Ireland, and of my father who spent his summers there as a boy. The island had no electricity, which made the islanders more aware of the fading and return of the light and of its endless, local permutations. I draw on the work of painters and filmmakers who see light's scarcity as part of the artform, and on life writing by Roland Barthes, John Boorman, John Berger, Elizabeth Bowen and others. What, I ask, does the long human quest for everlasting light mean in an era of light pollution and what Matthew Beaumont calls 'post-circadian capitalism'? Our turbo capitalist world rests on the fantasy of endless growth, continual betterment, life without end. One task of life writing, in an age of climate emergency, might be to help us accept our own finitude—to concede that our lives are a waking dream, refracted through light.

KEYWORDS
Light; island; life writing; light pollution

On 21 December 2020, on the darkest day of the year and in the middle of the UK's second national lockdown, I went for my one permitted daily walk at dusk. The bountiful light of the first Covid wave, with more hours of sunshine than any previous recorded spring, was long gone. The light was seeping away from the corner of south Liverpool, near the banks of the Mersey, where I live. Already, at four in the afternoon, the sky was sketched with dark infill as the Earth turned its back to the sun and rotated into its own shadow.

As a boy, I loved the dimming light in the run-up to Christmas, the melancholy bathing of streets by late afternoon in the Lucozade orange wash of the sodium-vapour streetlamps. Melancholy is congenial when you are young enough to assume you will live for ever and will always be there when the light returns. Now the light in my life felt sparse and finite. I had been counting down the days to the solstice, when the sun would hover briefly over the Tropic of Capricorn before switching direction. Life might be bearable on the other side, where the light was.

In the meantime, I was greedy for any kind of artificial light. Light is the food of the eyes, and I was hungry. So I gorged on the bright dots of the Cammell Laird shipyard over the water at Birkenhead, the flashing red aircraft warning lights on the tops of cranes, and the searchlights picking out the multicoloured shipping containers stacked like building blocks. That year, the Christmas lights had been up on people's houses since early November. One house I passed each day had an animated, rope-light Santa's sleigh with prancing reindeer running along its front lawn. All that illumination, spilt so profligately—yet I couldn't disapprove. Those people probably felt as starved of cheer as me.

That day my walk had a purpose. I was going in search of the Great Conjunction. By some peculiar cosmic ordering, on the day of the solstice the two largest planets in our solar system, Jupiter and Saturn, would almost overlap and appear together in the west, just after sunset. They had not been seen this close in the night sky for nearly 800 years. The newspapers had already named the Great Conjunction the Christmas star, the theory being that the star that guided the three wise men was a similar visitation—a conjunction of Jupiter and Venus on 17 June 2 BCE which would have appeared from anywhere east of Judea as a star

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setting in the west over Bethlehem. I walked down to the promenade by the banks of the river, where the horizon was lowest. And there it was: the biggest star I had ever seen. It was hovering above Rock Ferry, a suburb of Birkenhead, as if standing over a lowly cattle shed—a little disc of light that, emerging out of so much darkness, felt like a gift.

Of course, I knew it was a trick of the light, as everything is. The Christmas star was not a star, just two giant, gassy planets reflecting sunlight. Nor was it hovering above Rock Ferry. Jupiter and Saturn, though aligned in my field of vision, were 450 million miles apart. The sharp-eyed could have separated them in the sky; there was a gap between them about the thickness of a pound coin held at arm's length. But I am not sharp-eyed. Every year, as my corneas thicken, my eyes harvest a little less light. All seeing amounts to is gathering light. The strength of a telescope is called its *light gathering power* or its *light grasp*. What matters is how much light, with its precision-ground lenses, it can collect. We think of telescopes as magnifiers, but they are just more efficient light collectors than eyes.

In Robert Frost's poem 'The Star-Splitter', the farmer Brad McLaughlin burns his house down so he can buy a telescope with the insurance money. Brad calls his telescope the star-splitter because it allows what looks like a single star with the naked eye to be revealed as two. While his neighbours carry on with their hardscrabble lives, he does little else but gaze at the heavens. He figures, in a way that over the course of the poem comes to seem sweetly reasonable, that 'the best thing that we're put here for's to see'. The point of life is to look, to take the trouble to notice while our eyes can still gather enough light. But sometimes, perhaps, it is better to see through a comforting fuzz than to split every star. For me, Jupiter and Saturn twinkled, magically if erroneously, as the brightest object in the sky. Were the Magi, I wondered, myopic too?

*

In the western tradition, light stands for life and salvation—the banishment, at least for a time, of darkness and death. Words derived from the Latin words for light, *lux* and *lumen—illustrious, lustrous, luminous, lucid, enlightenment*—connote beauty, glamour and the truth made clear. So do words that finesse how light behaves: *brilliant, gleaming, shimmering, sparkling, scintillating, coruscating*. A few years ago, when my students really liked something, they said it was *lit*. It meant cool or exciting—but with the suggestion that anything *lit* was overflowing with life. Something about the word—single-syllabled, short-vowelled, moving from liquid to hard consonant—made it sound definitive, a three-letter stamp on all that was good.

Light is how most of us access lived reality; our eyes use it to collect data about the world. Under ideal conditions, the neuropsychologist Richard Gregory once calculated, the human retina, with its millions of light-sensitive cells, can pick up the light from a candle seventeen miles away (Gregory 2008, 22). For the sighted, this narrow band of the electromagnetic spectrum, from violet to red, is where it all happens. Light makes sense of our world because evolution saw an opening, a way of using a small slice of electromagnetic radiation to turn information into nerve impulses sent to the brain via an undependable, jelly-like organ made mostly of water. In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton wonders why, since light is 'almost life itself', it is 'to such a tender ball as the eye confined'.

The Book of Genesis says that light arrived on the first day. *Fiat lux*: let there be light. In fact, light was a latecomer to the universe, showing up a few hundred thousand years after the Big Bang, when photons could finally move through the thinning particles of space. Yet we take it as read that our world is transparent, and that light can travel unhindered to its final destination, our eyes. The fastest thing in the universe, light arrives so blithely that we don't even think of it as an intervening medium. It is ubiquitous and elusive, less something we see than something that allows us to see. To conceive of God as light, as many religions do, allows us to think of Him as more nebulous than an embodied being and yet not wholly abstract and unfathomable.

Everlasting light was once a dream as elusive as everlasting life. In Christian art, halos of light hover over the heads of saints, hidden shafts of light fall on them from the heavens, or their bodies glow with internal luminance. The Catholic requiem mass asks God to let *lux aeterna*, perpetual light, shine upon the dead. The *ner tamid* (Hebrew for 'eternal light') is a lamp that burns continually in a synagogue—a symbol of God's watchfulness over his people. The Qur'an compares God's light to the light lit from a

blessed olive-tree, 'the oil whereof would well-nigh give light even though fire had not touched it: light upon light!' What many of us now take for granted—endless light, so cheap as to be almost free—was once a miracle delivered by God's grace.

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For half a million years of human history, the only source of artificial light was fire. Until about 200 years ago, all but the wealthiest made do with the light from fires, burning pine splinters, lit rushes dipped in animal fat or foul-smelling tallow candles. The whaling industry exploded in the late eighteenth century when the spermaceti of the sperm whale was found to burn brighter and cleaner than other fats. In the Tropics they used fireflies caught in cages as lanterns. On Scottish islands they hunted an oily seabird, the storm petrel, threaded a wick down its throat and lit it. Light-deprived societies marked the year less by the lunar months than by the solstices, the fading and return of the light. In Irish, deep midwinter is *dúluachair*, from *dú* (black) and *luachair* (light). Our true adversary in winter, the word implies, is not the cold but the dark.

My grandmother was born and raised on an island in the Shannon estuary, off West Clare. The island had no electricity. The main sources of light were peat fires, candles made from the tallow that washed up on the western shore from shipwrecks, and paraffin lamps. The houses had tiny, recessed windows to protect them from the storms, so in winter the rooms were dark even in the daytime. The light the paraffin lamps gave off was just enough to illuminate a place at the dinner table, or a piece of knitting, or the pages of a book. My grandmother would have spent her days moving between these little islands of light.

The nights were bitumen black, apart from the lights of the trawlers passing in the distance and the acetylene beam of the lighthouse at the island's southern tongue. On the peat bog there were will-o'-the-wisps or *tine ghealáin*, flashes of dancing flame where the methane had spontaneously ignited. Light was so scarce it could be used as a messenger. Sometimes, fires were seen from the shore of the mainland—started by the men of the island who worked as river pilots. After piloting a ship to Limerick, or the oil refinery at Foynes, they would catch the bus back to the village opposite the island and light a fire on the strand. This was the signal for someone to row over in a currach to fetch them home.

In 1959, the islanders left the island for good, leaving only the family that tended the lighthouse behind. The absence of electric light, along with other luxuries like plumbing and outboard motors for boats, had hastened the exodus. The island remains uninhabited, and visits on the tourist boat are confined to daytime in the summer months. The Office of Public Works forbids unauthorised landings and overnight camping. Now no one sees the island at night as the islanders did, in its unpolluted blackness, with the stars wheeling overhead.

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Natural light is limited and fleeting. Some painters spend their lives trying to catch hold of the light that will give them the purest access to the world. 'Nature is too green and badly lit,' complained the eighteenth-century French artist François Boucher (Ashby 2023, 55). 'Mad I mean to be, till I get more light,' the English landscape painter Samuel Palmer wrote in a letter. 'And wherever I find it, I will turn to it like the sunflower.' Painting in London in March 1900, Claude Monet had fifteen canvases set up at once to catch the changing light on a day of sun, mist and squally showers. He worked, he wrote, 'in a frenzy … One marvel after another, each lasting less than five minutes, it was enough to drive one mad' (Wroe 2016, 193, 200). Van Gogh, Gauguin and Picasso all gravitated to Arles in southern France because the mistral blows away the dust particles that dim the brilliance of white light. Eric Ravilious, seeking a pitch to paint the chalk figure of the Cerne Abbas Giant in Dorset, was so anxious to reach a sunlit spot that he 'took a 5 bar gate a bit close and all but cut my breeches in two on a prong of barbed wire' (Wroe 2016, 200).

All these artists knew that in sunlight the eye sees most keenly, with objects sharply outlined and colours closest to true. They also knew that this sense of purer vision is deceiving. We don't see the world directly: our eyes receive the light that it rejects and that bounces off it, unwanted. The reality we observe amounts to the shifting tints and tones of the day and year. Rouen Cathedral is 500 feet high and took 800 years to complete. In Monet's series of paintings, it is an hallucination made not of limestone but of pale, chalky light.

Filmmakers, too, fuss endlessly about getting the right sort of light from the right direction at the right time. When the director John Boorman wrote a diary-memoir about the making of his 1985 film *The Emerald Forest*, set in the Amazon, the title he gave it was also his definition of cinema: *Money into Light*. The money pays for physical things like actors, sets and cameras, and transforms them into light flickering on a wall. Much effort goes into making this light show. The film's fate hinges on unreliable financiers, the logistical difficulties of moving people and equipment across Brazil, mini-revolts among cast and crew, and tense negotiations with people in the Xingu village of Kamaira to be granted access to their territory. Takuma, their shaman, is won over by Boorman's account of filmmaking. 'You make visions, magic,' Takuma says. 'You are a *paje* [shaman] like me' (Boorman 1985, 88).

Once installed in the rainforest, Boorman's crew must deal with torrential rain, mosquito bites, tarantulas a foot wide and huge ants that sting like snakes, along with the daily problem of finding sufficient light beneath the thick canopy to make the exposure metre's needle move. Boorman feels guilty about employing carpenters to build the fantasies in his head when they could have been building something more durable. 'There is a terrible arrogance about taking these resources and converting them into shadows, into nothing,' he writes. In the end, he decides it is worth it. Just as the Xingu people escape into the spirit world through music and dance, so in filmmaking 'we take the material elements of our society and transmute them into a stream of light flowing on to a wall, hoping that it will contain something of *our* spirit' (Boorman 1985, 229).

Digital cameras today are super-sensitive to light, so filmmakers can shoot in all conditions. The light on a face can be dimmed or upped in post-production, a whole scene relit in the editing suite. For Boorman, the light is now too easily won, and modern filmmakers have become more interested in story arcs and special effects than creating something truly cinematic. To deny light's evanescence, he argues in a more recent memoir, is to betray the artform. Film should not try to mimic reality but 'invite us into a contiguous world, recognisable but as different from life as dreams' (Boorman 2020, 218).

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The Celtic spring begins early—at Imbolc, on 1 February, midway between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox. Imbolc marks the beginning of the world renewing itself, the return of the light after the darkness of *dúluachair*. At Imbolc, the Cailleach, the old woman goddess of winter, gives up her crown and descends again into the underworld. Brigid, the goddess of spring and light, takes her place. Brigid was a pagan druidess who morphed into an early Christian saint, St Brigid of Kildare. Her sign is the dandelion, a sun-resembling flower nicknamed *bearnán-bríde,* 'the notched one of Brigid'.

Brigid was said to have been born on a threshold, in the doorway of a barn at first light. As befits her birth in this liminal space, she is associated with light, but in a way that grasps its symbiotic, turn-taking relation to darkness. One of many legends about her is that she was travelling through the night with a blind nun, Sister Dara, when the sun began to rise. Brigid prayed to God to restore her friend's sight so that she could witness the beauty of the dawn. The prayer worked, but Dara felt that the gift of sight had clouded the vision of God she had in her soul, and asked Brigid to make her blind again.

In her memoir *Self-Portrait*, the artist Celia Paul tells a subtly different version of this story, which she read as a young woman in a book of saints. In this version, Brigid herself performed the miracle of giving a blind woman her sight for a split second. What the blind woman saw—verdant fields with grazing cattle—was so beautiful she decided that this split second was enough, because 'the memory of it would light up her life for evermore'. Paul was moved by this version of the story, 'the ordinariness of the vision making it especially poignant' (Paul 2019, 130). Perhaps it appealed to her as an artist—someone who is forever chasing the light, trying to make the best of it before it disappears.

My grandmother, like many Irish women of her generation, was called Brigid. (In 1915, her birth year, it was the most popular girl's name after Mary.) On the island, they marked St Brigid's Day by leaving ribbons outside their doors before dawn to catch the first *fáinne geal an lae* ('bright ring of daylight'). By 1 February, the days were visibly lengthening, the calving season had begun and snowdrops were blooming in the meadows. In a world where light came and went with no thought for human life, and where it could not be easily

augmented, its retreat was mourned and its return celebrated. The light was fickle and left without a word, but it always came back.

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In his memoir *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes tries to rediscover his late mother by poring over old photographs of her. 'A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze,' he writes. 'Light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.' For Barthes, a photograph, unlike writing or painting, directly accesses another person, because its chemical traces on paper derive from rays of light reflected off an actual body. Some forms of light, though, feel closer to reality than others. Convinced that colour is a cosmetic extra, Barthes clings to the black and white photograph for 'the certainty that the photographed body touches me with its own rays and not with a superadded light'. Then, as a photograph ages, light turns into the enemy: 'Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes' (Barthes 1982, 81, 93).

Light is a tricky subject for a life writer because it can feel both elusive and absolutely present, intangible and absolutely real. In 2010, John Berger had his sight restored with cataract surgery, one eye at a time, allowing him to reflect on the contrast between fogged and clarified vision. As his sense of distance, depth and comparative scale were transformed, he became 'more aware of the air, the space, between things, because that space is full of light like a tumbler can be full of water'. Even the nights were now darker, because of their sharper separation from the day's fully-revealed light. Just as a dictionary reveals both a word's specific meaning and its place in the ecosystem of language, what he now saw with fresh eyes was 'like a dictionary which I can consult about the precision of things. The thing in itself, and also its place amongst other things' (Berger 2011, 20, 58).

Berger was an artist as well as a writer. Much of his work amounts to a philosophy of seeing, a study of life as a matter of refraction and partial perception. Light, he writes, is that 'which makes life and the visible possible … Just as fish live and swim in water: we live and move through light.' Seeing, for Berger, is less about accessing an agreed reality than fashioning a uniquely personal clarity. We use light to build our own truth. What we see has never been seen in exactly that way before, because 'on whatever it falls light bestows a quality of firstness, rendering it pristine, although in reality it may be a mountain or a sea that is x million years old'. Light exists, he writes, 'as a continuous everlasting beginning' (Berger 2011, 12, 38, 14).

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From the late nineteenth century onwards, a number of painters—Jack Butler Yeats, Paul and Grace Henry, William Orpen, Seán Keating—spent long periods in the west of Ireland. They were drawn not just to the landscape and the traditional ways of life but to the Atlantic light: its drawn-out dawns and dusks, its rapid shifts between brightness and shade, its soft, silvery scattering through low-hanging clouds. The light, they knew, is different wherever you are. It has its own signature, made of the interplay between its source, the medium it travels through, its path through that medium, the surfaces it hits and the angle it hits them.

On Ireland's west coast, the light mixes animatedly with those two other basic elements, air and water. A permanent pall of moisture joins the land, sea and sky. Storms are common, the rain perpetual. The German writer Heinrich Böll, who toured the west of Ireland in 1954 and spent time on an unnamed island in the Shannon estuary, thought the rain was just happy to land after travelling over 3000 miles of ocean. Water, he wrote, 'rejoices in at last reaching people, houses, terra firma, after having fallen only into water, only into itself'. The ever-damp air added a special flavour to the light: 'This clear, cold light does not penetrate the sea: it merely clings to its surface, as water clings to glass, gives the beach a soft rust colour, lies on the bog like mildew' (Böll 1967, 59, 70).

The estuary around my grandmother's island is three miles wide, almost ready to decant its waters into the Atlantic. The sky here feels as big as in Westerns, and the estuary acts as a giant mirror for the light. Looking east from the Angel's Height, the island's highest point, you follow the river back towards Limerick. Looking west, towards the estuary's headlands, you see the ocean dipping over the horizon. At the end of fine days this is where the sun sinks, its afterlight shining from where a new day is coming up over

Newfoundland. The wild weather throws up visual opacities—fairy mists, fog banks that look solid, atmospheric refractions where light rays bend the line of sight over the horizon or conjure up landmasses that aren't there. Italian sailors named these mirages *Fata Morgana*, after the Arthurian enchantress Morgan le Fay, who created visions of false land to lure seamen to their deaths.

In 1940, as a young woman, my grandmother left the island for England, to work in munitions factories in the Midlands. But in 1952, she came back to West Clare with her Dubliner husband and young family—disastrously, it turned out, because they were returning to a stagnating economy and spent the rest of the decade in grinding poverty. She had been homesick for the island. I wonder if, amid the soot-filled, smoky air of the Black Country, what she missed most was the light. On one of those uncommonly cloudless days of summer, with the Shannon flashing all around as the sun strikes its puckering surface, the light here feels like a blessing bestowed on the world.

Their return meant that, as a boy, my father grew up in the coastal village opposite the island, and spent every summer on the island itself. He would tell me how, on cold days when water evaporated from the river, the island would be shrouded in mist. The mist dispersed the light and mussed up the acoustics, sometimes muffling the sound and sometimes clarifying it. A voice a hundred yards away could feel as if it was by your shoulder. It all added to the island's porous, Brigadoonish quality, the hint that another world, lying low under an enchantment, might re-emerge through the scattered light.

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In light-deprived societies, light was work—the life-consuming labour that producing it artificially involved. In the 1990s, the Nobel Prize-winning economist William Nordhaus carried out a number of experiments with fire, and other primitive forms of illumination, to work out the lumens per watt. A lumen measures how much light a source emits; lumens per watt measures that source's efficiency in converting energy into light. An open fire, he found, produces 0.00235 lumens per watt. Innovations introduced over the hundreds of thousands of years since humans first made fire—candles, oil-burning lanterns, gas lamps—added just fractions to the illumination. Then the light bulb arrived. In 1920, a tungsten filament lamp produced 11.8182 lumens, making it thousands of times brighter than fire. The price of light collapsed. Nordhaus calculated that, when fire was our only source of illumination, it took 60 hours of work to gather and chop enough wood for 1000 hours of light. A modern fluorescent light bulb lasted for about 10,000 hours (Nordhaus 1996, 36, 52). And Nordhaus conducted those experiments thirty years ago: the new LED bulbs last even longer. The price of light is still falling.

In her essay 'Modern Lighting' (1928), Elizabeth Bowen hails this new world of electric light and its reshaping of perception. 'We work like sculptors upon these blocks of pregnant darkness rooms have become,' she writes. 'We can control shadow: place, check, and tone light' (Bowen 2008a, 26). In a much later essay, 'New Waves of the Future' (1969), Bowen argues that 'our century is light-conscious, as was no other … We moderns love light with an extra ardour, seeking it out.' Guided downwards in street lamps, 'light has something saving about it, like pure water' (Bowen 2008b, 42).

Bowen's work shimmers with unsullied delight at human-made light—a western counterpoint to Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1933). Tanizaki criticises the westerner who, in his striving for progress, 'spares no pains to eradicate even the minutest shadow'. Our Japanese ancestors, he writes, understood the inevitability of the dark and 'its own particular beauty'. *In Praise of Shadows* honours Japan's traditions of dimly-lit outside toilets, light diffused through paper-panelled doors, and candlelit restaurants that bring out the beauty of the lacquerware. Its author ends with a plea to 'call back at least for literature this world of shadows we are losing' (Tanizaki 2001, 48, 22, 63).

Bowen and Tanizaki were writing in electric light's golden age. The rise of national and regional grids was turning it into a ubiquitous feature of life in Britain and Japan, but it still retained elements of novelty and marvel. Its beauties and its attendant losses lay in delicate balance.

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For more than six hundred years, from the early sixth century onwards, my grandmother's island was inhabited by monks. The psalms, which they would have sung every day by rote at the canonical hours,

are in love with light. *Light is sown for the righteous. In thy light shall we see light. Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*. On my most recent visit to the island, I stepped inside the ruined cathedral and noticed something for the first time: the main window was positioned precisely to catch the rising sun. I pictured the monks singing the night office, their a cappella chanting filling the darkness until, in that east-facing window, the light appeared.

Nature's unending dance of light and dark measures out our lives. As the Earth rotates, the twilight zone moves across the globe and divides our days from our nights. As the Earth tilts, the share of sunlight each part of it receives changes, lengthening and diminishing the days and making the seasons. Everything alive must take its turn in the dark. This means that everything alive also responds to the amount of light it receives, because the length of the day is predictable and the best proxy for the time of year. Natural light is information. It tells living things when to breed, when to hoard, when to hibernate, when to flower.

The direction and progress of light through that window over the course of a year, as the earth tilted and swivelled and the angle of the sun altered, had not changed since the cathedral was built. The daily light show had carried on uninterrupted all that time, even for the more than sixty years since the islanders had deserted the island and no one had been around to see it. The sun's rays were meant to pierce that window with clockwork regularity until the end of the world. Light antedates and will outlive us.

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the term 'light pollution' to 1969. Around this time, astronomers began deserting telescopes near cities for observatories in the middle of deserts and on mountain tops, in search of darker skies. In 1988, Dave Crawford and Tim Hunter, two astronomers working at separate observatories near Tucson, Arizona, founded the International Dark-Sky Association. Since then, dark sky reserves have been designated around the world, but they have done little to halt the spread of light elsewhere. Matthew Beaumont calls our era one of 'post-circadian capitalism' (Beaumont 2015, 5). The gods of money and work must be appeased by carving out more useful hours with ever more light.

It's not just that more of the world is lit, and for longer, but that it is all so needlessly bright—like those Rottweiler security lights that people put up on the sides of their houses to deter intruders, but that give off half the power of a lighthouse's Fresnel lens and are just as likely to blind them and hide a burglar in shadow. Modern LED lights are more energy-efficient than incandescent ones, but also cheaper, so their proliferation offsets any ecological gain. Much of this light—streetlight bouncing off pavements, billboards lit by lamps pointing heavenwards, the flattering uplighting on historic buildings—heads uselessly into the sky.

Of all forms of pollution, light pollution is the easiest to solve. It leaves no aftermath, no toxic waste to be cleaned up or disposed of. All we need do is turn off the lights. But it is also the form of pollution we struggle to take seriously. Our stunted ecological imaginations make it hard for us to connect up the different parts of our lives—to see the link between a floodlit five-a-side pitch or some garden fairy lights and rising sea levels and record temperatures.

The first victim of light pollution was the first moth that flapped around a human-made flame, mistaking it for the moon. In places flooded with electric light, songbirds get confused by permanent false dawns. Crickets mistime their twilight mating song. Insects die of exhaustion in the snare of streetlamps, or get picked off easily by bats. Male glow worms confuse illuminated billboards with the luminous females they should be mating with. Night-swarming mayflies mistake lit asphalt for the polarised light of rivers and lay their eggs on the road. Birds migrating at night are drawn to the glow of cities, where they collide with glass-curtained tower blocks, white with office strip lights. The sidewalks of Chicago, a high-rise city on the migratory flight path from South America to Canada, are littered with the carcasses of birds—killed not so much by cruelty as by a sort of willed unnoticing.

As for humans, our lives are diminished in less obvious ways. The future is skyglow, that pink-orange fog that hangs over towns as floating dust and water vapour scatter their night lights, and which seals us off from the universe, robbing us of any sense of its depth and magnitude. I am a Generation Xer from the Global North, brought up on TV and other indoor pursuits. I find it hard to summon up the requisite awe about a celestial sublime that was already succumbing to that pink-orange fog when I was growing up. My days hurry by in a haze of fluorescent lighting and computer screen glow. Often my only hit of natural light

comes in the walk from the car park to my office. I rarely think about the forms of light I am deprived of, the things I can no longer see, the differently-lit lives I could be living.

Doomscrolling in bed in the dark by the junk light of my phone, I am well aware that I am feeding the online world's trade in 24-hour noise. Still I go on doing it. Seasonal Affective Disorder, that winter sickness of sunlight deficiency, is often attended by cravings for starchy foods, as our bodies beg us for a quick high. I hanker, too, after the sugar rush of junk light when I am feeling lonely, fearful or sad. Nutritionists call cheap, ultra-processed foods, stuffed with fat, salt and sugar, 'hyper-palatable'. Junk light is hyper-palatable too: addictive and consoling but, in the end, unsustaining. I dose up on it like an addict needing a bigger hit for the same high.

For millennia, our love of light went unrequited. Then, at least in the richer parts of the world, our love was returned with limitless radiance, and we feasted on it until we were sick. It altered the rhythms of our lives, shifted our moods, changed how we see the world, and cut us off from other living things—and all in ways that we barely register. Until electric light arrived, we were diurnal and seasonal beasts, locked into day-night rhythms. Then we weren't. When my circadian clock is screaming at me to sleep, the flickering screen keeps me awake. Why wouldn't that mess up my life as much as it does a glow worm's?

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Seamus Heaney grew up on a small farm in Derry in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of the scenes in Heaney's poems—the biblical routines of looking after beasts and crops, fetching water from the well, rats scrabbling round the thatched roof at night—find echoes in my father's accounts of life on the island. Heaney told his fellow poet Dennis O'Driscoll how, when he was a boy, they kept the front door open in the summer to let the light in and supplement the 'mote-slants' of the windows. At night there were 'candles in the bedrooms, an oil lamp on the wall in the kitchen, maybe a hurricane lamp in the scullery. The Tilley lamp and the Aladdin came later' (O'Driscoll 2009, 12).

The title of three of Heaney's collections (*Door into the Dark*, *The Haw Lantern* and *Electric Light*) all refer in some way to light. The poems set in his childhood are awash with paraffin oil, candle grease and wick-soot, the daily chore of lighting lamps and keeping them alight. Once lit, they are swung through the farm on winter evenings or burn invitingly at windows. The title poem of *Electric Light* begins in Heaney's grandparents' house, the first house he encountered with electricity, where the simple light switch, or the knob that lights up the wireless dial, performs a magic trick.

My father had the same birthday as Heaney—13 April, seven years apart—and they even looked a little alike. Both had ridden on a similarly fast track into modernity, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries with just a brief stop in the twentieth. When Heaney died in 2013, he sent his last words to his wife (*Noli timere*, or 'don't be afraid') via the LED display of a mobile phone. When my father died, five years later, I saw his life bookended and complete in the way that you do when a life is over. It struck me that he, too, had made this vertiginous journey in just a few decades from the pre-electric world to the new photonic age, when a million YouTube cat videos could cross the ocean via a single fibre-optic line.

Now I dismiss the dark with a prod of the torch symbol on my phone; the backlit displays of my devices give off a low blue light I hardly think of as light at all. The world I live in hinges on light, from the lasers that control the dynamics of matter—reading bar codes, powering office printers, shattering kidney stones, correcting vision—to the data-loaded photons of the internet. I am not obliged to think about any of this, until the wifi is down and its absence becomes a passing irritation. My father, like Heaney, never stopped noticing. He remembered the thrill that greeted the arrival of electric torches on the island in the mid-1950s. The islanders used them to send messages to each other across the fields by Morse code, and the river pilots now flashed their torches to signal to the island instead of lighting fires. The batteries for those torches were hoarded like a miser's gold.

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In December 2012, almost 40 years to the day after one of the Apollo 17 crew took the famous 'Blue Marble' photograph of Earth floating in space, NASA unveiled its 'Black Marble' video of Earth by night. It was a composite of hundreds of pictures, taken by a satellite hovering 500 miles high as the Earth turned below.

NASA then spent two months tweaking the pictures to get rid of the non-human light. All this other light—from the moon, rivers, seas, clouds, snow, ice, and the leaves of plants and trees—was airbrushed away to leave only the light made by us. Our night lights shone with a detail and lucidity never seen before.

NASA updates the Black Marble regularly, and now an algorithm deletes all the non-human light. Scientists, geographers and humanitarian organisations use Black Marble data to track the expansion of cities, the displacement of peoples, the rise of the huge refugee camps at Za'atari and Kutupalong, the spread of bushfires, the power cuts after hurricanes and superstorms, and the bombing of towns like Aleppo and Mariupol into darkness. The data even tells us that the night lights of Europe and North America are about 50 per cent brighter in the run-up to Christmas. The Black Marble is a record of our collective comings and goings, proof from afar that we have left our mark on the Earth.

Seen from space, artificial light tells a story about how human settlements form, how we move through the world and make our lives in concert. Those lights tracing the outlines of continents suggest that we like to cling to the flat, fertile land of coasts. The brilliant blobs of light formed by the largest cities suggest that people are settlers who huddle for warmth around others. The spindly tendrils of light linking those blobs, like the golden latticework of America's interstate system, suggest that, conversely, we are restless, always wanting to be elsewhere. Argentina's evenly-spaced points of light would, if joined up, show its railway lines, because many of its towns grew up around stations. Pakistan's largest cities—Karachi, Larkana, Sukkur—trace the line of the River Indus. The Trans-Siberian Railway has left a traceable line of dots all the way from Moscow to Vladivostok. The River Nile, from the Aswan Dam to the Mediterranean, is a single sparkling thread fanning into Cairo's golden triangle of light.

But the story isn't that simple. The Black Marble is well-named. A century and a half after the invention of the incandescent light bulb, the Earth at night, seen from space, looks mostly unlit. This blackness might fool you into thinking that people have made only pinprick impressions on the Earth, just dashes of brightness like quartz glistening on a wet paving stone. Antarctica is entirely dark. So are the snow forests of the North, the rainforests of the Tropics and all the world's deserts and mountain ranges. The oceans are black, apart from the larger islands, like the glittering necklace around the Caribbean Sea that forms the Greater and Lesser Antilles. If you zoom in very close you can see, near coasts, fishing fleets using spotlights to entice fish into their nets.

The lights of South Korea stop neatly at the 38th parallel, as if someone has drawn a line with a ruler. The totalitarian state to its north is black apart from the tiniest white dot of Pyongyang. Large swathes of Russia, South America, Africa and Asia are black, apart from the odd ball of flame from a megacity like Johannesburg, Hong Kong or New Delhi. Naples has a dark circle at its heart: Mount Vesuvius. Milwaukee and Chicago hug one side of the black U-shape of Lake Michigan. Australia's outback is just a few speckles of light. Perth, 1300 miles from its nearest neighbouring city, Adelaide, shines proudly alone as it did in 1962, when John Glenn orbited the Earth in Friendship 7 and its people kept their lights on all night so that he could see them.

Those dark areas of the Earth house billions of people, who either have no electric light or are too poor to keep it on all night. They tell a different story—about the legacies of colonialism and the unevenness of 'development'. They are a reminder that there is no uniform 'we', equally culpable for the burning up of our planet's resources. Not everyone in the world is in love with light. For some cultures, skyglow is a catastrophe. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia need the night sky to navigate, to predict the weather, to understand the seasonal behaviour of plants and animals, and as a mnemonic device to pass down lore through the generations. Crucially, they are as interested in the dark bits of the sky—like the gas and dust of the Milky Way, which blocks its own light and forms shadows with distinguishing shapes—as in the brightest stars.

Ever since the medieval clergy and aristocracy hoarded all the beeswax candles, which gave off the best and steadiest light, the brightest places on Earth have been the richest. That means the nuggets of light that run from Los Angeles to San Diego, and from New York to Washington via Philadelphia. That flare-up in the Mojave desert is Las Vegas. Dubai is a dazzling strip of light on the Persian Gulf. An unbroken line of opulence runs through northern Italy from Milan to Venice. Belgium and Luxembourg, two wealthy countries with the best-lit roads in the world, look like they are ablaze.

The now abandoned islands of Ireland's west coast, including my grandmother's island, are, of course, black.

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In bored or procrastinating moments at my desk, I search online for images of the Black Marble, and zoom in on different areas of the world. I know I am wrong to think it beautiful. I know I am buying into the old Enlightenment story that equates light with progress and darkness with its opposite. But I can't help finding them heartening, these lights the world leaves on at night, made up of billions of individual lives, declaring their presence to each other. I think of all the unknown people adding to the mix: the schoolboy doing homework in his box bedroom via the small pool of light from a swing-arm desk lamp, the teenager texting on her tiny screen as she walks along an unlit stretch of pavement, the man leaking light from his open garage door as he sorts through boxes of life detritus. Our night lights disclose this self-governing human community silently remaking itself—a view somehow more affecting for being an accident, a fairy-tale land made of light pollution. An astronaut of the future, returning from an intergalactic mission, might look on that sight and think, as returning sailors must feel seeing the harbour lights: *home*.

Light connects us, however tenuously and problematically, with our tribe—like when we were small and our parents left the landing light on and the door of the bedroom ajar, a little shaft of connection in the dark. In Emily St John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*, a nomadic troupe of actors perform Shakespeare in a post-apocalyptic, candlelit world, in the isolated settlements of the Great Lakes, to pockets of survivors. What they miss most of all is electric light. Catching sight of towns through aeroplane windows at night and imagining the countless, nameless lives lit up at that moment. Lifting their phones to take pictures of concert stages lit by candy-coloured halogens. Being able to flick a switch without thinking and flood a room with light. In the absence of skyglow, the Milky Way is once again a single wash of light, but they would all swap that view for their former lives. When, towards the end of the book, a distant glimmer suggests civilisation's return—spots of light arranged into what might be a functioning electrical grid—they feel a strange, trepidatious joy (Mandel 2014, 311).

There's no getting round it: human-made light is exquisite when viewed from afar. It looks anonymous and authorless enough for us to disclaim responsibility for it, and to fudge the fact that it is provided and distributed so unequally. When I look at the Black Marble, I feel, like Mandel's characters, nostalgic for the era of endless light—even though that era is far from over. It tells me how ingrained my love of light is, and how hard it will be to learn to live with less of it.

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Artificial light is a human triumph. How brave and clever of us to winkle out more illumination from nature's measly ration, to be so curious about the world, to want to shine a torch into its dark corners and light the way that guides us to each other! Hands up who wants to go back to the world of firefly lanterns and dead-bird lamps. Not me—no thank you. Why wouldn't we, like plants that grow towards the sun, not want to grab whatever light we can and let our eyes wolf down its photons while there is still time, before everything goes dark? *The best thing that we're put here for's to see*. But too much light is also a calamity, for the world and for us. If our love of light is not to ruin us, we need to stop seeing it as an infinite resource, and reacquaint ourselves with the natural seesaw of light and dark.

Some of us bought into the myth of everlasting light because we thought ourselves immortal. The turbo capitalist world we live in relies on the fantasy of endless growth, continual betterment, life without end. One task of life writing, in a climate emergency, might be to help us accept our own finitude—to concede that we are bound to the Earth, our only home, and constrained by the same limits as all forms of life. Every life is limited by its refraction through light. We pour our guts into it and in the end, as John Boorman said, it is just light flickering on a wall, a game of shadows, a half-remembered dream. Then a switch is flicked and we are thrown into the dark for ever.

The triumph of artificial light is the triumph of sameness. A 24/7 world is a world of relentless visibility, what Jonathan Crary calls 'a world identical to itself, a world with the shallowest of pasts' (Crary 2013, 19). I am trying to spend less time in this world—rationing the junk food of the blue-flickering screen, turning off

the strip lighting in my office when I don't need it, taking lunchtime walks to catch the sun's rays. I am going in search of the light that enmeshes me with other humans and other living things, that is part of the endlessly circulating energy of the world. This kind of light is as good as eternal, because photons, as massless particles, don't decay. And so, if not for me, the year's circle will keep turning, the light will return, and life will go on. Now, when I feel deprived of light, I remind myself of the endless, local permutations of it that only come from that scarcity. I think of the island and its shapeshifting shadows, a single sunbeam poking through low clouds, an Irish midsummer twilight stretched out until nearly midnight. The light that is always dying, but that never ends.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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