

# MIDWINTER LIGHT AND SHADOW

Peter Reason stops to watch low sun on an orchard wall

A cold, January day in the orchard, the sky a clear, washed-out blue, thin and insubstantial. A brisk wind blows from the west, cold on the fingers, the ears, the nose. The high stone walls afford much shelter, but stronger gusts still penetrate, spinning eddies across the meadow grass and setting the young fruit trees trembling delicately. Outside, the top branches of the big ash trees sway in imperious sweeps, the branches clatter in the gusts, twigs break off and tumble down.

At this midwinter time, even at midday, the sun scarcely rises over the rooftops. The south wall casts a shadow across the entire width of the orchard. In contrast, the tops of the taller fruit trees catch the sun. The south-facing wall, too, is bathed in light, which glints on brighter deposits in the stone, glows on patches of egg-yellow lichen, and casts contrasting dark lines along the joints between the stones. Apple, pear and plum trees grow espaliered along this wall; leafless, their skeletal structure is clearly visible. In a double image, this structure is echoed on the wall, real and shadowed branches and twigs in crazy entanglement.

A few spots of colour stand out: the row of windfall apples left out for the birds, yellowing green, with hints of rosy red; one golden corn marigold, last survivor of a summer flowering seed mix, catching the light at the bottom of the wall; and a nasturtium, which flourished in the autumn once the blackflies were no longer around to check it, now straggles frostbitten across the ground, a few weak flowers still holding a touch of orange.

There seems little strength in the sunlight. What warmth it offers is blown away by the chill wind. But when I place my palm against a stone on the wall, it is warm to the touch. Curious, I walk across the grass to the opposite, shaded wall; it is frigid. It feels as though this coldest part of the orchard will never come back to life. Yet, as I stand there shivering, I remember how in the long days of midsummer this north-facing wall was also bathed in rich golden light by the morning and evening sun, with pink campion growing from cracks between the stones, the stones patterned, not with skeletal shadows, but by fully leafed trees.

There are more reminders of the changing seasons. Although the fruit trees are bare, a closer look reveals leaf and fruit buds. For now they are encased in little polished domes, purple and crimson, but ready to burst forth once the days are longer and the temperature rises. This cold weather is good for the trees: it



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checks the bugs that cause leaf curl in the summer. But not, I imagine, good for the little birds flying around in search of food; there are no berries left for them on the hawthorn, so I replenish the peanuts in the feeder. Blue tits spot them quickly and are soon hopping nervously in the branches waiting for me to be away so they dare venture into the open.

It is time to go. As the short afternoon closes, the light slowly fades. Minute by minute the last of the blue drains from the sky. Dense rain clouds, a strange pinky grey, move majestically across the sky. Heavy spots of rain fall, and in the gathering gloom I return to the house. R

Peter Reason's latest book, *In Search of Grace: An Ecological Pilgrimage*, is published by Earth Books. [www.peterreason.eu](http://www.peterreason.eu)