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NATIONAL  
QUALIFICATIONS  
2007

TUESDAY, 1 MAY  
2.30 PM – 3.20 PM

ENGLISH  
STANDARD GRADE  
Credit Level  
Reading  
Text

Read carefully the passage overleaf. It will help if you read it twice. When you have done so, answer the questions. Use the spaces provided in the Question/Answer booklet.



## DARKNESS AND LIGHT

*In this passage Kathleen Jamie describes a visit to Maes Howe, one of the most important archaeological sites on Orkney. Her visit takes place in December, just before the winter solstice—the shortest day of the year.*

1 The building nowadays known as Maes Howe is a Neolithic chambered cairn, a tomb where, 5000 years ago, they interred the bones of the dead. In its long, long existence it has been more forgotten about than known, but in our era it is open to the public, with tickets and guides and explanatory booklets. It stands, a mere grassy hump in a field, in the central plain of Mainland Orkney. There is a startling collection of other Neolithic sites nearby.

2 To reach Maes Howe I took the road that passes over a thin isthmus between two lochs. On the west side is a huge brooding stone circle, the Ring of Brodgar. On the east, like three elegant women conversing at a cocktail party, are the Standing Stones of Stenness. The purpose of these may be mysterious, but a short seven miles away is the Neolithic village called Skara Brae. There is preserved a huddle of roofless huts, dug half underground into midden and sand dune. There, you can marvel at the domestic normality, that late Stone Age people had beds and cupboards and neighbours and beads. You can feel both their presence, their day-to-day lives, and their utter absence. It's a good place to go. It re-calibrates your sense of time.

3 Two men were standing at the car park at Maes Howe. The taller, older man was wearing a white shirt and improbable tartan trousers. As I stepped out of the car, he shook his head sadly. The younger man was dressed for outdoors, somewhat like a traffic warden, with a woollen hat pulled down to his eyes and a navy-blue coat. For a moment we all looked at each other. The taller man spoke first.

4 "Not looking good, I'm afraid."

5 The timing was right, the sun was setting, but . . .

6 "Cloud," said the tall man.

7 "Can't be helped," I replied.

8 "Will you go in, anyway? You can't always tell, you just need a moment when the cloud breaks . . ."

9 Alan, an Englishman in Historic Scotland tartan trousers, led me into a little shop to issue a ticket. The shop was housed in an old water mill, some distance from the tomb, and sold guidebooks and fridge magnets and tea towels. From the window you could see over the main road to the tomb.

10 "Tell you what," he said. "I'll give you a ticket so you can come back tomorrow, if you like, but I can't give you one for the actual solstice, Saturday. We start selling them at two-thirty on the actual solstice. It's first come, first served."

11 "How many people come?"

12 "Well, we can accommodate 25, at a pinch."

13 But today there was only myself.

14 The young guide, Rob, was waiting outside. A workman's van hurtled past, then we crossed the road, entered through a wicket gate and followed a path across the field. We were walking toward the tomb by an indirect route that respected the wide ditch around the site. Sheep were grazing the field, and a heron was standing with its aristocratic back to us. There was a breeze, and the shivery call of a curlew descending. On all sides there are low hills, holding the plain between them. To the

south, the skyline is dominated by two much bigger, more distant hills, a peak and a plateau. Though you wouldn't know it from here, they belong to another island, to Hoy. Above these dark hills, in horizontal bars, were the offending clouds.

\* \* \*

15 You enter into the inner chamber of the tomb by a low passageway more than 25 feet long. It's more of a journey than a gateway. You don't have to crawl on hands and knees, but neither can you walk upright. The stone roof bears down on your spine; a single enormous slab of stone forms the wall you brush with your left shoulder. You must walk in that stooped position just a moment too long, so when you're admitted to the cairn two sensations come at once: you're glad to stand, and the other is a sudden appreciation of stone. You are admitted into a solemn place.

16 You are standing in a high, dim stone vault. There is a thick soundlessness, like a recording studio, or a strongroom. A moment ago, you were in the middle of a field, with the wind and curlews calling. That world has been taken away, and the world you have entered into is not like a cave, but a place of artifice, of skill. Yes, that's it, what you notice when you stand and look around is cool, dry, applied skill. Across five thousand years you can still feel their self-assurance.

17 The walls are of red sandstone, dressed into long rectangles, with a tall sentry-like buttress in each corner to support the corbelled roof. The passage to the outside world is at the base of one wall. Set waist-high into the other three are square openings into cells which disappear into the thickness of the walls. That's where they laid the dead, once the bones had been cleaned of flesh by weather and birds. The stone blocks which would once have sealed these graves lie on the gravel floor. And the point is, the ancients who built this tomb lined it up precisely: the long passageway faces exactly the setting midwinter sun. Consequently, for the few days around the winter solstice a beam of the setting sun shines along the passage, and onto the tomb's back wall. In recent years, people have crept along the passageway at midwinter to witness this. Some, apparently, find it overwhelming.

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18 We crossed the field. The heron took to the air. I dawdled behind. My guide, the young Rob, was waiting at the entrance, which is just a low square opening at the bottom of the mound. I glanced back at the outside world, the road, the clouded sky over Hoy's hills, which did not look promising; then we crept inside and for a long minute walked doubled over, until Rob stood and I followed.

19 Inside was bright as a tube train, and the effect was brutal. I'd expected not utter darkness, but perhaps a dullish red. Rob was carrying a torch but this light revealed every crack, every joint and fissure in the ancient stonework. At once a man's voice said, "Sorry, I'll switch it off," but the moment was lost and, anyway, I'd been forewarned. As he sold me the ticket, Alan had told me that surveyors were inside the cairn, with all their equipment. "A bit of a problem", was how he'd put it. And here they were. We entered the tomb and, in that fierce white light, it was like that moment which can occur in midlife, when you look at your mother and realise with a shock that she is old.

20 The surveyors were doing a project that involved laser-scanning, photogrammetry, and pulse-radar inspection. They were working inside the tomb, and had been for days. A huge implement, I couldn't tell if it was a torch or a camera, lay on a schoolroom chair. There was a telephone in one of the grave-cells. There were two surveyors. One was folded, foetus-like, into the little cell in the back wall. I could see only his legs. He grunted as he shifted position.

21 “Strange place to spend your working day,” I remarked.  
22 “You’re not wrong,” he replied, sourly.  
23 His older colleague seemed glad for a break. He stood, a portly man in a black  
tracksuit and fleece jacket, and stretched his back. Somehow he dimmed the light  
and the tomb settled back into restful gloom. The outside world was a square at the  
far end of the long passageway. There would be no sunset.  
24 “Too bad,” the surveyor said. “Oh, well.”  
25 Rob, hunched in his woolly hat, drew breath and raised his torch as though to  
begin the guided tour, but he paused.  
26 “Been here before?” he asked me.  
27 “Several times.”  
28 He said, “We’re on the Web now, y’know,” and gestured with the torch to a camera  
mounted on the Neolithic wall. “Live. Don’t go picking your nose.”  
29 “Watch your eyes!” said the voice from the grave-chamber, then came a detonating  
flash.

[*END OF PASSAGE*]