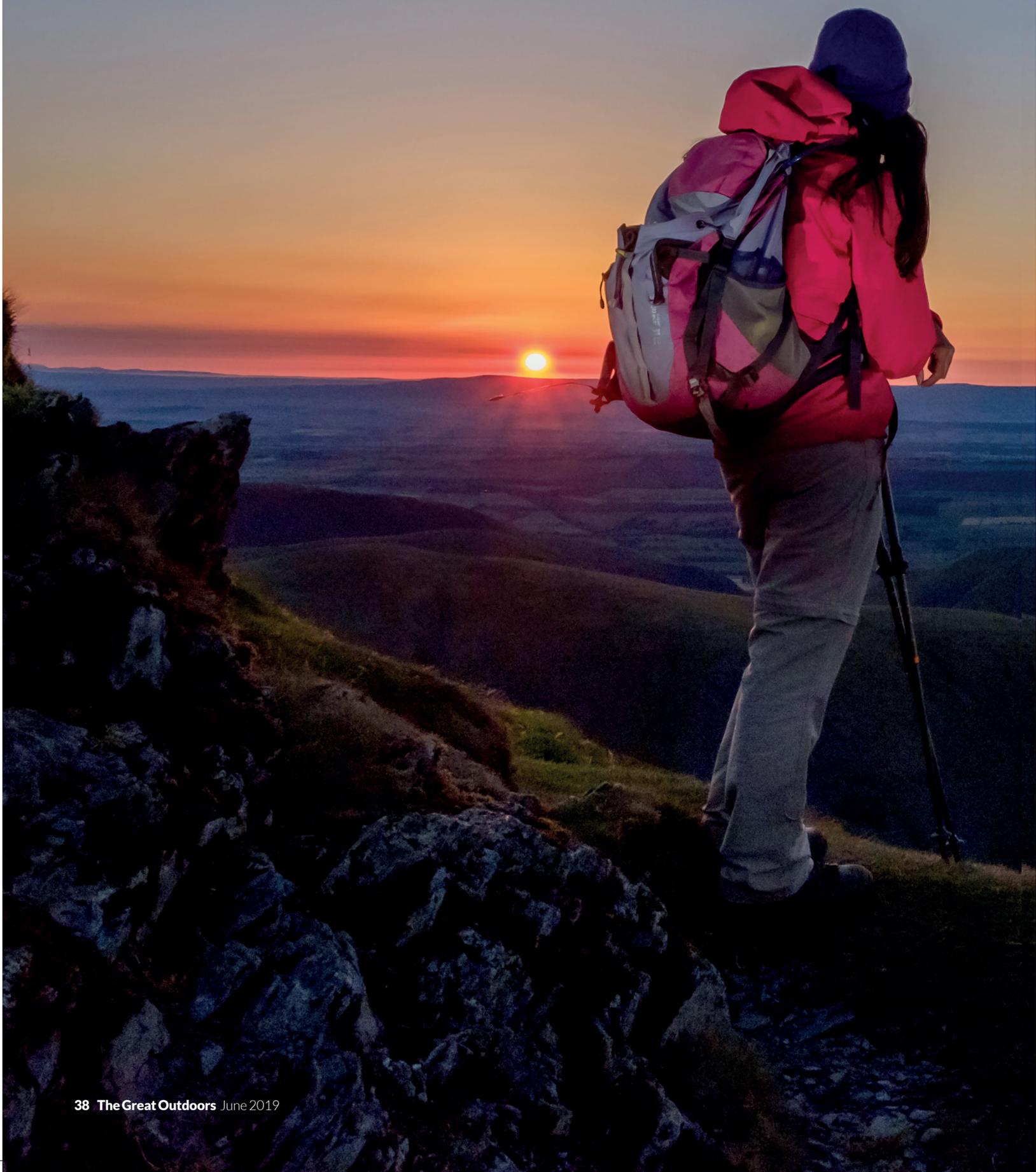


# Lake District



# INTO THE NIGHT

Vivienne Crow celebrates the summer solstice with a moonlit walk between Skiddaw and Blencathra

PHOTOS: DAVE WILLIS

# Lake District

I'VE BEEN SITTING ON SKIDDAW'S flat, slate-covered summit plateau watching the slowly setting sun for more than an hour. There's no wind and the quiet is so profound I can hear the swoosh of the swifts as they dive for flies. The landscape around me is steadily changing: the colours and definition of the high ridges are becoming more intense while, in the valleys, shadows consume all. I glance over my shoulder, to the east, and a shiver runs down my spine; my onward route has already been overwhelmed by the creeping twilight. I eagerly turn back to face the sun. It dips behind a veil of murk sitting just above the horizon and suddenly changes from orange to fiery red. The hills of Dumfries and Galloway shine crimson, and every bay and inlet on the other side of the Solway Firth is clearly outlined. It's a magical moment, but I can feel the fingers of darkness at my back, unnerving me. I don't want to hang around any longer; it's time to set off into the night...

## Into the unknown

Psychologists are constantly telling us that our fear of the night is ancient, a hang-over from prehistoric times when darkness brought an increased risk of attack, either by fellow humans or by predatory animals. To be scared of the darkness is

therefore quite natural – part of our DNA. As hillwalkers, we sometimes experience darkness from a wild camp or bivvy, but walking during the night is normally associated with things having gone awry: navigational errors, bad weather, a wrong turning, an injury... any one of these things may have caused us to become benighted. To actively seek out the darkness, on the other hand, involves a shift in perspective.

I've long been attracted by the sky. It doesn't matter where I am – on top of a hill or in the middle of a city – staring into the daytime sky always has the power to transport me, to lift me beyond the mundane. Come the night, that same sky offers up even more; the lid is lifted on our beautiful, azure-bound world to reveal something beyond our imaginings, a glimpse into infinity that manages to be both exhilarating and gut-wrenching.

A previous attempt at night-walking was a big disappointment. I followed all the advice – I used a route I knew well, I kept to paths and I switched my headtorch on. The latter was probably where I went wrong. I ended up walking through a tunnel of light, surrounded by inky blackness, unable to see anything around me except the ground in front of my feet. I felt totally cut off from my surroundings and was constantly fearful of what might be 'out there' in the dark.

I've planned my second attempt to coincide with the nearest full moon, weather permitting, to the summer solstice. I'll watch the sun go down from one summit, walk through the short night and then enjoy dawn from a different summit. With no major hill groups blocking my outlook to the north, the Lake District's Northern Fells seem ideal: Skiddaw for uninterrupted views north-west and Blencathra for its distant horizon to the north-east. As before, I will keep to routes I knew well, but this time I won't rely on artificial light.

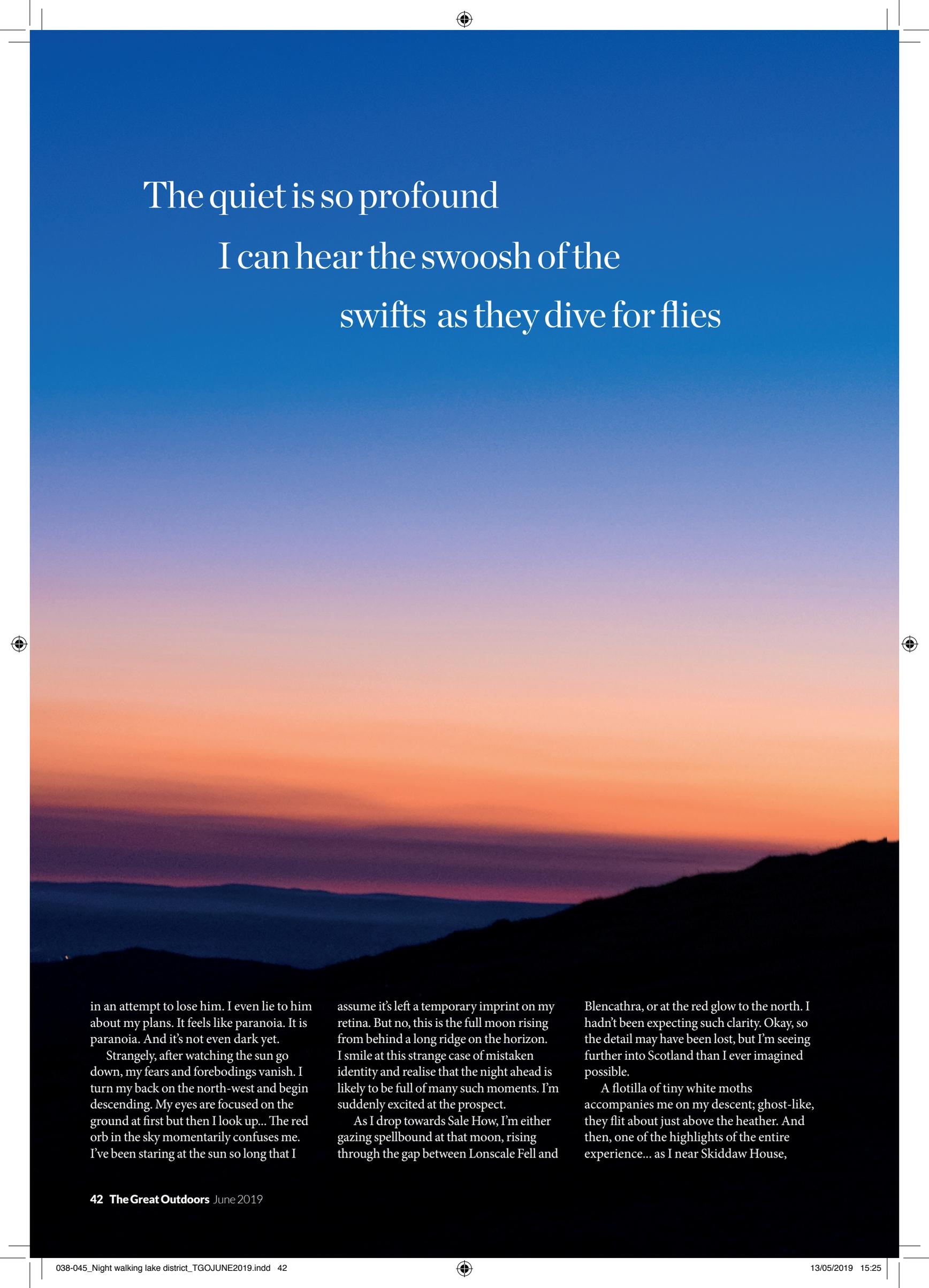
## Night fears

As I set off alone up Skiddaw's well-worn 'tourist' path on a warm, cloudless summer's evening, my many doubts and fears feel absurd in such benign conditions. Would I have enough to eat? Would I be cold? Would tiredness overwhelm me and lead to an accident? What would it be like when night fell? What might be lurking 'out there'? My biggest fear is not of stumbling over a rock or something in the dark, but of encountering other human beings. Normally keen to chat with fellow hill-goers, I do my best to shake off a man who falls into step beside me – also on his way to watch the sun set. I venture off-piste on countless occasions, using my desire for photographs as an excuse, all

[previous page] Vivienne watches the sun rise from the summit of Blencathra  
[below] As the sun begins to rise, the full moon can be seen above the fells beyond Derwentwater [right] Star trails from Blencathra







# The quiet is so profound I can hear the swoosh of the swifts as they dive for flies

in an attempt to lose him. I even lie to him about my plans. It feels like paranoia. It is paranoia. And it's not even dark yet.

Strangely, after watching the sun go down, my fears and forebodings vanish. I turn my back on the north-west and begin descending. My eyes are focused on the ground at first but then I look up... The red orb in the sky momentarily confuses me. I've been staring at the sun so long that I

assume it's left a temporary imprint on my retina. But no, this is the full moon rising from behind a long ridge on the horizon. I smile at this strange case of mistaken identity and realise that the night ahead is likely to be full of many such moments. I'm suddenly excited at the prospect.

As I drop towards Sale How, I'm either gazing spellbound at that moon, rising through the gap between Lonscale Fell and

Blencathra, or at the red glow to the north. I hadn't been expecting such clarity. Okay, so the detail may have been lost, but I'm seeing further into Scotland than I ever imagined possible.

A flotilla of tiny white moths accompanies me on my descent; ghost-like, they flit about just above the heather. And then, one of the highlights of the entire experience... as I near Skiddaw House,



a badger suddenly appears and comes scampering up the path towards me. It's clearly unaware of my presence. I've only seen one badger in the wild before – and that was running full pelt down a road, not a million miles from here, in broad daylight. That was hardly the animal's natural habitat or its normal behaviour, so I'm thrilled to see this one. I stand rigid, holding my breath, and still it approaches. As I'm forced to exhale, it looks up and sees me. Hardly perturbed by the sight of this figure just a few feet in front of it, it casually changes course and disappears back into the heather.

## The dark

As I pass Skiddaw House, the sound of teenage laughter and the smell of aftershave drifts from the tents on the other side of the

remote hostel's walls. This reminder of the everyday world feels incongruous in the deepening darkness. It briefly shocks me out of the reverie created by the combined effects of the moon, the light and the dusk wildlife. It isn't long though before that dream-like state consumes me again.

The little temperature changes sometimes experienced in the daytime – pockets of warmth and cold that you briefly wander through – seem more pronounced. I don't know if this is a physical reality or simply a result of my other senses taking over from the limitations of sight.

My eyes are coping well with the darkness though and I resist any urge to switch my headtorch on. There are one or two occasions around the head of the Glenderaterra Beck when the path becomes rougher underfoot and I wonder

if lighting up might be the sensible thing to do, but I tell myself that, once I've succumbed to it, I'll be more dependent on it. This is so different to my first night walk; I've never experienced the hills like this before – and I don't want anything to spoil it. Tonight, I'm able to see everything: the hills, the stars, walls, abandoned buildings, occasional lights from distant farmhouses, the boulders masquerading as mysterious night-time beasts lurking in the bracken, the sheep masquerading as boulders...

Lonscale Fell, always an imposing presence in this valley, has never looked better; its sharp, pyramidal outline silhouetted against the night sky lends it greater stature than its 715 metres might otherwise suggest. Darkness has brought greater power and mystery to all around me; I can only guess at the



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[above] The early sun hits the rocks on Hall's Fell Ridge [right] Vivienne on Blencathra's main ridge, with Clough Head, the Dodds and Helvellyn behind

detail of these landforms, like I can only guess at what lies among the stars and planets above. There is potential here; the possibilities seem endless. I love Everest mountaineer E F Norton's take on this potent otherworldliness... *"By daylight we view matters in an eminently earthly, worldly aspect; moonlight seems to bring us face to face with greater and more lasting ideas; it lends a touch of the supernatural to our vision,"* he wrote in his 1925 book, *The Fight for Everest 1924*.

As I set off up Blease Fell, Blencathra's western slopes, I use my torch to find the path, but quickly switch it off again. The moon comes into its own now, lighting the way for me and my rather impressive shadow. I'm starting to tire, so I take frequent rests and consume surprisingly large amounts of food. My breaks are longer and more numerous than they need to be because I want to sit and soak up my surroundings, to fully appreciate the whole experience – full immersion in the night; a rare thing.

Most people are in bed by now, fast asleep. Those who aren't are in cars, in their homes, in bars, in towns and cities, the darkness driven out by sodium, halogen

and LED; I'm under the glow of the moon, gazing up at the stars, looking down on the lights of Keswick, on the black hole of Derwentwater. The single screech of a barn owl reaches me from the trees below, another sign that I'm in a different realm here, now – these are slopes I've climbed or descended many times before, and yet they're alien to me.

In his 1954 memoir *Starlight and Storm*, French alpinist and mountain guide Gaston Rébuffat wrote: *"In this modern age, very little remains that is real. Night has been banished, so have the cold, the wind and the stars. They have all been neutralized: the rhythm of life itself is obscured."* To allow the night back into my life, just for a few hours, feels almost liberating; it feels, as Rébuffat wrote, "real".

## The light

But it is just for a few hours. As I regain the high ground, I can see a line of red along the northern horizon. It's probably been there all night. Hundreds of miles away, communities are enjoying the midnight sun. The glow becomes more intense as it edges round to the north-east with the approaching dawn.

I'm due to meet photographer Dave Willis near the summit. I spot an unusual pole sticking out of the ground near the top of Knowe Crag; it's not until I'm a few strides away from it that I realise it's a tripod. Dave is tucked up in his sleeping bag nearby. I gently wake him and we continue together to Hallsfell Top.

A grey light brings increased clarity to the landscape almost two hours before dawn. I confess I'm disappointed: the night and its magic have both vanished, the hills are insipid in the half-light, and tiredness is gaining the upper hand. Eventually though, the red glow in the north-east becomes the sun, and the world is flooded with a beautiful, fresh, clean light. Directly below us, I see the arête of Hall's Fell in a new light – both literally and figuratively. I want to stand on its sunlit apex, pick my way down its rocky crest, but I know my sleep-deprived brain can't be trusted on this narrow ridge. The moon is there too – it sits high in the sky above the High Stile range to the south-west. While the intervening valleys remain in shadow, the fell-tops in that direction are pink. This glorious light show seems a fitting finale to my all-too-short excursion over to the dark side. ▀

