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EMILY HIESTAND
Afternoon Tea

Tea is the steady companion of the Scottish day, and each hotel, no matter how humble, stocks its rooms with supplies for brew-ups: electric pot for boiling water, ceramic pot for brewing, china cups and small tea-creamers, a raft of teas, honey, fresh milk, and lemons. This is a delight and an astonishment, for not only is there no such thing in American hotels, but room service even in respectable ones, when asked for tea with milk, can deliver a plastic jug of tepid water, this covered by a square of Saran Wrap, and a drinking glass of milk. To request tea in an American office is often to throw the receptionist into a swivet: he or she believes that there is tea somewhere in the corporate pantry, but where? One prefers not to ask rather than to send this person on a scavenger mission, especially because the tea, if found, is a grim bag-tea like Red Rose. Naturally, one might as well ask for a trip to Bombay as to ask for looseleaf Earl Grey, or first-flush Darjeeling, or Assam tips. Home is a fluid place; each day at four o'clock, I could easily be an expatriate.

One afternoon we are poking up the rocky coastline from Black Craig near Stromness north past Skara Brae to Brough

Head; this western end of the island is folded and fissured in a steady cascade of bays, headlands, ghouls, caves, and the handsome invasions of ocean into the land that are called geos. These places are named Lyre, Nebo, Axna, Saed, Sand, and Skipi, in a succession of sounds as quirky and original as the land. We wind slowly north toward Skipi Geo just around the Brough of Birsay, stopping to walk Marwick Head. The wide plateau at the summit of the cliff tilts at a precipitous angle toward the sea, covered with great, loose, cracked plates of flagstone in thin layers: orange, grey, ochraceous rocks that will weather into fertile soil or be pried up for roofing flags if they do not first slide into the sea. The bluff is perpetually wet and glistening, and cold water pools dot the depressions and rectangular fissures in the rock. Over the exposed plateau, wind blows in steadily and coldly from the sea. This is the home of the largest and most spectacular seabird colony on Mainland; some thirty-five thousand guillemots, ten thousand kittiwakes, as well as fulmars and razorbills, who favor the eroded flagstone ledges for nesting and the abundance of shoaling fish for eating. But in this stormy weather, only a few guillemots—auks, and clumsy on land—bumble along the slabs of pitted rock cliff. For miles to the west, there is flat, grey, choppy ocean; for miles to the east, a grey, clouded sky under which low, treeless fields roll smoothly into the moors.

It is nearing four o'clock in the afternoon, and sure enough, parked just off the road, overlooking the pungent tidal flats, we come upon a small caravan camper with its aluminum door open to a late-middle-aged Scottish couple, sitting at a folding table, taking tea and biscuits. Passing by, one only has a glimpse: his thick, white socks and heavy black shoes; her plump pear form and print dress; the electric kettle on the table. The archaeologists are puzzled as to why the people of ancient Skara Brae would locate their huts so close to the sea, and have surmised that in fact the settlement was originally located in a protected hollow, that

time has eroded the shoreline inland toward the huts. That would make sense. Indeed, when presented at Skara Brae with the lure of a sparkling sea and the howling wind, we ourselves tucked into the hollow of a dune for lunch, eating cheese and apples in the sun with wind skimming our heads, blowing the sand into rippling ridges, flattening the beach grasses. Probably the archaeologists are right, but this utterly typical sense of Scottish domesticity blithely planted at the edge of harsh cliffs, afternoon tea conducted in the wind and cold, suggests another possibility.