

ANTLER

'A landscape that retains the light and is there waiting to receive you on your dark dead days'

Neil Gunn

...antler is a shed material which means you don't have to kill an animal, you can collect the cast antlers from the forest floor, from the moor... it's valuable for its toughness, its plasticity, its resistance to impact... interesting and fun to think of our very very long relationship with deer... ideas travelling through societies around the North Sea basin and Baltic. Around 4000 BC hunter gatherers interrelated with farmers, the folks that had come from the Iberian Peninsula with their new ways. All that social dialogue through the millennia, and to think (chuckle) of the animosity that can exist between deer stalkers and farmers today...

I'm usually kept in the dark, but even from inside a mahogany drawer I can hear the professor's patter. I like him, he uses words like 'dynamism' and 'relational', and when he lifts me from my labelled Tupperware into the dusty light, he holds me with a reckless tenderness. I may be tough enough to have survived thousands of years, but I'm a sucker for soft. And for these pelts of words that I don't claim to entirely understand, but that line me in velvet.

He's still talking, and I'm being passed around a group of all-ages. It might be a surprise to you, but I love this bit: the hands' different feels and temperatures, the smells, how the nature

of folk resides in their pores. All this sensing takes me back to when I was set hard and high on my beast, when I was a part of his instinct and intelligence.

In a group of two-footeds I affect some more than others. It's aye been that way, but it's a rare thing to raise tears; hers like autumn rain slipping off leaves, when one lands the salt of it soaks deep into my own porosity. I am heady in her gaze, and her thoughts branch-dance with my own. How she enlivens me with her holding. And however uncanny it may seem, how much she... yes... how much she *loves* me. And how much she loves the others: that bedrock of deer ghosts that have run and swum, calved and lactated, mated and fought, breathed their first and last, since I fell – millennia ago – with a soft thud onto May's greening moss.

I know her thoughts here... now... how she wants to be inked with me, there on the pale soft underside of her forearm. How she imagines herself connected to ancestors – hers and mine both – although truth be told that may have been my own thought first; with intimacy like this thinkings become porous, communal. Anyway... what matters is the ellipse of my burr - this strong base that held fast to the pedicle on my beast's head, and that then let go. What matters is the bone-goodness and oldness of me; the heft of me in her hands; the roughness as she runs her thumb around my circumference – the perforations where nerves and blood travelled – and onto the smoother grooves of the tines, up into that place where the professor points out smash marks; he hypothesises I was used as a tool, something to do with canoes.

What matters is how we read each other in languages beyond tongues, how we merge like water.

She's back to imagining me, there on her arm, with her forever. How humans love to make marks, to flirt with pain and permanence, to be inked with the power of deerkind; the erupting, enduring symbolism of us. All that hope and growth and resilience, the growing back, coming back, year after year, knock after knock; worn and embattled, hungered sometimes, but never embittered. Always determined to be... to be deer.

While I see charcoal, she sees ink; either way a gift is a gift, and anyway...

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The ascent was three and a half hours of relentless steep. The two women set off at 5am with torches, heading into the promise of a temperature inversion. Leaving the tangle of October bracken behind, they climbed up through five hundred metres of low-lying cloud that breathed cold onto their sweating faces. Cloud that hid a woodcock, a snipe, three rounds of clacking ptarmigan. Cloud that shrouded rutting stags and magnified their roars droplet by droplet. At eight hundred metres the women emerged into pink light and a sun rising over a white shining sea of cloud.

Rachel had been quiet on the walk up. No breath for talk, but also scunnered by the recent news of her redundancy; a shock she was processing with each effortful step, with each reach of her hazel stick, her right hand holding fast to its cleft of antler.

How many years had she worked for them, on that hill she'd listened and watched and walked into the very marrow of her bones. *Them*, who she'd given a decade of her life over to. She and her colleagues given notice of their redundancies, all of them working on the ground like her, doing community building around conservation work. 'Colonialism is a

rupture of the maps between land, body and soul'. She'd read this somewhere and the words had stuck, a neat summary of a subject that interested her. Now, out of the blue, these words arrive, matching how she feels about this severing from work and place and dreams.

A rupture she hadn't seen coming.

At the summit they breakfast on boiled eggs and cheese. Eilidh produces a small unlabelled plastic bottle. 'Bunnahabhain,' she laughs, offering it to Rachel. Few words are spoken as they sit in near windless calm above the expanse of bright cloud. A scatter of summits hover like faraway islands, and where the cloud meets rock, it hurls and breaks like waves frozen mid-surge. The two friends catch each other's thoughts: this, here, right now, as close to perfect as anything either of them have ever seen. Two ravens drop rounded shining sounds replete with everything that had ever needed saying.

Why now, why here, she doesn't know, but Rachel has a sudden memory from her archaeology student days; the Mesolithic deer antler she'd held in that professor's library, and the question he'd posed: 'Who are the invisible people that we don't pick up through certain methodologies?' She remembers his fondness for ephemeral traces of humanity like perforations on a cowrie shell, birch sap glue, teeth marks on bone, impact marks on antler. How he talked about hunter gatherers being seasonally mobile – like deer – moving up and down hills, inland, coastwards. How he questioned whether learning from hunter gatherers might provide an antidote to modern living; crisis management for now.

Today it's all hidden. The ruckus and roadkill, wood lorries, wind turbines, hydros, sitka plantations, hill farms, the inbye, schools, churches, sheep fanks, peat bogs, tracks and roads, houses and shielings, stone dykes, fences, graveyards, railway lines, the ferry ports,

petrol stations; brushstrokes of humanity in all its complexity. Today this is hidden, not even a contrail in the sky. Today is pristine.

In the leese of a rock, flush of moss glows green, and a spatter of crimson like fresh blood; *Cladonia cristatella* – British soldiers lichen – thriving.

The only sounds are the wind's occasional gusting, those two ravens, stags' intermittent roars breaking the blanket of cloud. You could almost imagine everything in right balance, a time when there were far fewer deer than now, far fewer people, and we each had our rake of predators. No fences strung on power and money, no concept of land ownership. We've lost so much, it would be good to get some of it back again. How, she wonders, in amongst all these angry people and battles?

God knows she'd tried. Changing public perception on the need to reduce deer numbers, and the possibilities around less reliance on fences; to have deer just roaming the land, their interdependence with the tiny little things we can barely see, the mosses and lichens and beetles. We keep getting it wrong because we're just humans, and because balance is not set in stone.

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In a drawer in a library, on the far side of the country, a deer antler from the Mesolithic feels a tingling, something like blood returning, something like mist rolling, like dust detonating in sunlight, like ptarmigan wings backlit and whirring. Something like the world righting itself, the torque between fragility and power. Something like survival.

Antler feels every prick of the needle, knows itself to be in branch-dance with her-with-the-tears. With each scratch and prick darkness finds peace under pale skin and in shadow of velvet. Antler and woman hear the professor's words rebound off high places: 'assemblage'... 'enigma'... 'truth grounding'... 'archaeological skills transferable to the present day and speculative futures', 'imaginative potential', 'uncertainty'.

Hooves and feet tangle in folds of mist and rainbow. How the blood roars.

(1490 words)