

Mountain Writing Competition 2021

Prose 1st prize

Snowbound

By Adam Boggon

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Skirlin, spitters, flicht, snaw-pouther, neester, driffle - the Historical Thesaurus of Scots records more than four hundred words for snow. I especially like *gramschoch* (the conditions before a snowstorm) and *flukra* (a large snowflake). The word I needed though was *feefle* - the sound of moving snow. It is almost no sound at all, less than a rustle.

The snow reached my mid-shin. Fresh, light powder. The path was unbroken and we took it in turns to run ahead and cut steps. The going was heavy yet somehow light. The top layer scattered before our churning legs. My stride seldom cleared the depth of the drift so a cascade of displaced snow rolled ahead of me like the bow wave of a small boat. It felt as though I were running through someone else's dream.

The Great Glen: that deep tear in the land dividing the Northwest Highlands from the Grampians. It was to be a two-day effort: Invergarry to Inverness, fifty miles. Take the long sneaking trail in winter and run all day. Achievable in a weekend given fair weather and motivated companions. The right sort of people proved difficult to find. Alibis were numerous: engagement parties, family illness, being in New Zealand.

One exception was Megan. Our friendship was based on commiserating over broken relationships and trying to restart my car. The other was Charlie, who sat wide-eyed as the bus took us to Invergarry through heavy snow in the night: "You can't even see the road!"

In the morning I asked Megan how she felt about the day ahead. Toothbrush lolling out the corner of her mouth, she replied: "Fine. I'm worried my bag's going to chafe though."

"Have you run with it before?"

"Yeah."

"Did it chafe then?"

"Yeah."

I fuffed nervously with my bags. I had no real sense whether running would be viable. If the snow was too deep to get into a rhythm or the way covered in sheet ice the journey would be off before it had begun. I strapped on my running bum-bag, slung a small pack over my shoulders, pulled on a bobble hat and stepped into the -5°C morning.

We joined the trail as it wound steeply up the glen. The pine forest was dense, windless, the deep silence muffled further by the heavy layer of snow which covered every surface. The trees were laden, limbs bowing earthward under the weight of snow. The branches reminded me of Japanese winter prints in the British Museum and the cover of Bashō's 'Narrow Road to the Deep North'.

The low, pale sun crept over the horizon. The way dropped from the woods to the side of a canal. The surface of the water was frozen and I imagined ice-skating along it all the way to Fort Augustus. By the canal the snow was thin with a crunchy, icy layer but we soon climbed back into the woods to deeper lying drifts. The sun was bright and almost warm on our cheeks when it broke through clearings in the pine, the only sounds our breath and the infinitesimal muffling feeble.

As I ran my thoughts wandered - up tree trunks, into the animal footprints on the path, toward the prospect of lunch. They alighted on a half-remembered passage from a book called 'The Wayfinders':

"In the mountains of Japan, outside of Kyoto, Tendai monks sleep for two hours a day and, with only a bowl of noodles and a rice ball for food, run through the sacred cryptomeria forests 17 hours at a stretch for 17 years, covering at one point in their kaihigyo initiation 80 kilometres a day for 100 days...Beneath their white robes they carry a knife and a rope. Slung from their back are rope sandals. They wear out five pairs in a day...all with the goal of revealing that everyone and everything are equal, that human beings are not exceptional, that nothing in the world is permanent."

By the time we dropped out of the woods at Invermoriston, Charlie was struggling. He had prepared for a fifty-mile run with an evening squatting at the gym. Seventeen miles in, his discomfort peaked. We cut away a thick covering of snow from a bench and ate a few slices of bread. Charlie couldn't go any further and waited for the next bus.

For Megan and I the path wore on. The trail ran higher, into deeper snow. The extra resistance and effort began to tell. At mile twenty three the path kicked up again and I knew I was moving into Big Wall country. The running tracker in my pocket told me I'd used something north of five thousand calories, with no allowance for the extra energy expended ploughing through snow all day. My little parcel of bread, butter and dried fruit did what it could to stave off the exhaustion of my glycogen stores but ultimately the distance told.

The progressive deterioration in my physical condition teed me up for a further psychological thump. I had been in contact that week with a friend who now lived in North America. I missed her every so often, quietly, at the end of a long day or when something especially good happened that I'd liked to have told her about. Now my sense of her being gone grabbed the sides of my skull and pressed hard. Darkness bubbled up. My left knee gnawed painfully. I thought: "You're a fool. You've left Charlie shivering in the snow. What made you think this was a good idea? It's time for you to sit down. Now!"

I staggered to a halt. Knees trembling, I sagged into the snow. I reasoned with myself: "Come on, you're being melodramatic. It's just a wall. You've been here before. You know it can be passed through."

I put on my jacket, rooted around for my bag of dates and mango, drained a bottle of water. Waited for Megan. A shade of concern flickered across her face. I smiled and gave a theatrical run-down of my disintegration. This gave me a sense of release and I remembered I'd come to the mountain path to run, not to make a fuss. And if I couldn't run, at least I could trot. Even if this wasn't an economical way to cover ground, I dedicated myself to trotting. I heaved my body out of the hole in the snow and got back to the task. At the top of the rise the path bent sharply and flattened out. The hillside fell away to the right and through the clear air I looked down the length of Loch Ness, the hills beyond that, and the perfection of blue sky above everything else. I felt new strength in my legs and a hardening of my resolve. It was the second wind.

My legs shuffled through the deep snow, aching knees hardly bending. It wasn't dignified athleticism but there was a certain spirit, of something old in life which is hard to break. We left the woods and were on the road to Drumnadrochit as darkness fell. The soft snow trail behind us, the last of the day's thirty miles would be on tarmac.

My left knee was really biting now. The scouts of soreness that had issued forth earlier in the day had ceded the field to great armies of pain. They roamed the scarred landscape of my body, victory almost complete. But the last of my stubbornness, knowing from the lights in the distance that the end was no longer far, held out in the last beleaguered keep. The final fastness of my fastness - the stout-hearted trot, held on until the end. Finally, almost unbelievably, we were among the street lights, then down the snowbound side-street, at the hostel door, inside the warmth of the bar. It was done. Which was just as well, because so were we.

Inside we met Nicola, the hostel owner who twenty years before had babysat for my brothers and me.

"You ran here? From Invergarry? Oh my."

I gradually regained my sense of being a human. A shower, a cup of tea, fresh clothes. A few minutes laughing and lying flat on my back in the bed was a good start. A scalding hot shepherd's pie and a big cake with almond and raspberry and custard in the Loch Ness Inn completed the metamorphosis from pack animal to person. I was exhausted but glowing, vanquished but triumphant. Before going to sleep we decided we'd give the last twenty miles to Inverness a miss. If that meant failure we didn't mind.

I have learned that a single day can contain almost the whole of life. A week later, sitting in the cinema watching advert after advert for cars I did not want and could not afford, I felt a restiveness steal over me. I wanted to be moving through trees again. I wanted to be running through the snow, though the snow had melted now. I knew then that movement itself is primal and primary. Its rhythm is like the beating of the heart, it rises and falls, but keeps going. Keeps going to the end.