

## Mountain Writing Competition 2021

Prose 2<sup>nd</sup> equal

# Journey to the place of dreams

By Adrian Ward

*Adrian alternates between East Renfrewshire and Kincaig, where he wrote this piece – his first such venture – on the spur of the moment after a ski-touring friend had referred him to an item on the Mountaineering Scotland website, where he saw a notice about the competition.*

They dream.

All summer long they dream, rounded backs towards the outer world, facing inwards where they cradled the dwindling vestiges of the last Ice Age. They slumber in the shared companionship of their dreams – dreams of their magnificent glacial past, a past ground into the stern features of each of those ancient, uncompromising faces, indifferent to the burgeoning growth and life of another summer.

And then they stir, roused by the first sprinklings of autumn snow. Snow showers grow into blizzards, temperatures plunge, until those mountains thrill once more to the wild magnificence of their arctic reality. True to what they have always been, neither kind nor cruel, they embrace those who come on their terms, accepting the full power of their primeval wildness, and release those visitors back to the outer world; yet with the same embrace they extinguish those who disrespect their infinite power, or are unlucky.

Ever true to themselves, accountable to no-one, they are the High Cairngorms.

---

They were born from great icesheets, slowly emerging as huge glaciers ground out the shape of landscapes beneath, and meltwaters carved the features that we see today. Life came slowly to their emerging flanks, even to their highest wind-blasted tops: a boreal life of pioneering lichens and mosses, dwarf willow, birch and pine, and gradually a larger and joyous multiplicity, each finding niches for itself.

Animals came too, from elk and reindeer to the large carnivores who preyed upon them, down to the tiniest insects. Large birds soared above; small ones hopped and fluttered in bushes and reeds. Salmon began their annual migrations, arriving as the mountains fell asleep again, dancing in deadly coordination with the arriving ospreys who swoop and pounce to feed their broods. Frogs, newts and adders all emerge each year from melting winter and begin their annual cycles.

Mankind heaved ancient rocks to form their abodes, brought their own animals, tended their crops, always respecting and being part of that wild but rich environment presided over by the sovereign peaks of those great mountains, the High Cairngorms.

---

People became greedy and careless. They felled forests and replanted with sterile density; cleared out diversity to over-populate with a few species for their own profit and pleasure; cut the

mountains' flanks with gaping tracks, and shackled them in structures created for their own transient enjoyment; even shifted the very seasons. But what they would destroy is their own environment, the stability and diversity on which they depend to survive, while over the millennia the mountains slowly adapt and always survive, remaining true to themselves, forever the High Cairngorms.

---

Other people came too, tending and healing the wounds, patiently teaching how to enjoy without harming, re-learning the respect of centuries past. They do not foolishly aspire to the impossibility of conquering the mountains. Rather, they come in homage to visit them, with the humility of those who would learn from their ancient wisdom, and blend in as threads in the great tapestry of that unique reality. They glory in both the long hours of golden low-angle summer sunshine, and the ravaging power of winter storms. They come as acolytes to the infinite mysteries of the High Cairngorms.

---

One of them had now grown old. In his youth he had visited every top and corrie, swum in every lochan, walked the long passes, stitched his winter footsteps across large snowfields. Someone lent him skis and boots, boots with holes matching the pins on each ski, and cables that tightened round his heels. Now he moved easily and freely over the winter landscape, stroking and caressing his way across the highest slopes, learning to navigate through whiteouts, using clear days to visit many tops in a single long trip, then descending in swooping curves and little clouds of stardust, and finally rattling down icy tracks between trees in the last frozen glimmerings of daylight.

As he aged, his mountain-weathered face became less varying in expression, more constant in the intensity of his character, as free and independent as the mountains. On a day of gales and incessant driving rain, when the radio reported a search for lost climbers said to be experienced mountaineers, it was his voice heard to pronounce: "The only place that you will find experienced mountaineers on a day like this is here in the pub". When it was gently suggested that he try something more modern than his ancient wooden skis, he responded with a teasing twinkle: "If the good Lord had intended us to ski on plastic skis, he would have given us plastic trees!"

---

It was winter. He still left his stone cottage for trips in the mountains, but for some time the folk of the valley had been concerned. He looked unwell. He sometimes seemed to wince in pain, but if anyone asked how he was, he would just say "Ach well", and change the subject.

---

It was a beautiful calm sunny morning, tingling with frost, when the police received a call from the shop. He sometimes missed a day when he had gone out early for a trip, but not two days running. No-one had seen him out and about. The sergeant borrowed the key from the old neighbour who held it. The house was empty. The skis were not there.

The rescue team soon found the tracks, shaping a beautifully contoured route ever upwards, like a lingering and haunting pibroch flowing to the rhythmic beat of ski poles pressed into the snow, one alternately on each side for every stride. Gradually those strides had shortened, with more frequent pauses and ski poles pressed ever more heavily into the snow. Yet astonishingly, despite his age and reputed frailty, they continued, towards the lowest gap between those great rounded backs.

Suddenly, the strides, still ever uphill, became longer and stronger, without pauses. Uphill tracks only. The team fell silent, with increasing awe and reverence gradually accepting the inevitability of what they would find.

He lay lifeless and frost-dusted in the snow, right at the top of the gap, where all the surrounding impassive faces of the mountains could be seen. The team likewise stood round, silent witnesses to something profound, which was not the usual tragedy of a young life needlessly lost. Eventually their leader spoke, with long pauses, firstly to him: "Well done. You made it." The muffled murmur of gloved applause began tentatively, then swelled to fill the still space between the nearest hillsides.

When the silence of the surrounding vastness repossessed their space, she looked round the faces of her companions, then: "We must take the body down now", with a gentle emphasis on "body". She turned and looked round the faces of the great mountains, that were his lifelong companions. "He, the man whose last journey brought him to this place, we leave forever here, where he belongs."

In respectful silence again, they followed their usual routine, and set off downhill, on the same route. Wherever he had paused on his upwards journey, they now paused, and turned, and looked back to where another dream now slumbered forever amidst the eternity of the summits of the High Cairngorms.