

## Mountain writing competition 2020

Prose 3<sup>rd</sup> prize

# Stag

By Jacqueline Bain

**"I live in Paisley, Scotland and am a former nurse and hill walker, who now enjoys writing and garden wildlife, and am limited by mobility problems."**

The plateau was completely frozen; a sheet of solid ice, surrounded by steep-sided scree corries that plunged to a vast raw landscape of moorland, lochans and lichen-splattered boulders. On the far-off horizon, undulating, snow-lathered Scottish peaks climbed and dipped like a train of camel humps.

There were only two options. Keep going or turn back.

My brother John stepped on to the makeshift skating rink. The snowfall had, at last, fizzled out so he yanked his hood down. The tips of his sticky-out ears burned red against the backcloth of wolf-grey-and-black sky. Perfectly formed snowflakes clung, wind scattered, to his crimson, winter-slapped cheeks.

I was glad to snatch a few minutes rest. All morning we'd slogged through ankle deep and occasionally knee-deep snowfields, where skittish winds skirled like bagpipes, and whipped sastrugi into spindrift breakers that blew into our eyes.

Dawn, when we'd set off, seemed like a lifetime ago. Streaks of silver daylight had wriggled like eels in the southeast sky, and sunrise brought swathes of floating, bejewelled rainbow droplets. But since then there'd been nothing but walls of mist and snow-smudged views.

An Arctic chill slunk under my waterproofs and straight into my bones. But as I glanced around at the camel-humped panorama; its highest peaks smothered by smoke ring clouds, I experienced the inner thrill that only mountains gave me. A sensation that was both physical and spiritual.

John was the only other sign of life. No other climbers or ramblers, no wild creatures - just me, my brother and winter's solitary, ferocious spirit. Whilst watching John footer at the plateau's treacherous edges, I stamped my feet, scuffing up myriads of iced fairy dust. The clink of his ice axe echoed like the chip-chip of a stonemason's chisel.

Mountains usually gave me my best winter wildlife sightings, but that day all I'd seen so far was miles and miles of snow-blurred, creature-empty polar tundra. I thought back to the weekend before when the highlight had been snow buntings on Beinn a' Chroin.

John had scaled a small glacial waterfall, ice-petrified on to the rock face. He skipped up like a mountain goat with me behind, heching and peching, sweating and cursing. Just as I hauled myself over the ridge with the dignity of an exhausted slug, a concerto of shrill songbird chittering tinkled like church bells.

A black wing-tipped mini-murmuration of eight snow buntings whirled by, skimming the ground and then air-wheeled upwards, and over the ramparts of a corvid-black, furrowed crag.

Stag

John's voice, half-shouting above the whistle of an increasingly savage gale, broke my reverie and the buntings fluttered back into the realms of the past.

"Rock solid! Fine if you want turn back."

I knew he knew I'd turn back in a flash. The plateau was narrow and dangerous, and the wind was getting worse. I appreciated his offer, the unselfishness, the sacrifice, but he knew that I knew that turning back was the last thing he'd want to do.

I looked at his eyes. It was like looking into the ice blue-and-green lochans far below, clear, deep and mysterious; transparent kists brimmed with notions of adventure and ambition. I loved the mountains for their scenery and liberty, their poetry and songs, inspiring my imagination to run wild and free, making up stories of wolves and lynx prowling the glens once more. For John, mountains were forces to be explored and conquered.

His eyes held no shadows, unlike mine where the risk of potential death skulked around the innermost regions of my brain. The fear was a constant companion, a spectre haunting the mountains in all seasons, but more forceful in wintertime. It didn't stop me hill walking but I was always alert to its presence. I had what Hamish MacInnes called 'a canny respect for the hills'. Always mindful of the phantom traipsing alongside us, leaving grim reaper footprints in the snow. I saw none of those fears in John's eyes, only a reflection of the chiffon-grey pallor of midwinter skies.

I had a sudden longing for summer when decisions seemed less intense, less life threatening. Yet even then my phantom never left my side. One day in particular sticks out in my mind. We'd been on the Cobbler, a favourite summertime haunt. John went there to hone his climbing skills. Dad and I often accompanied him just to have a day out on the hills.

We always arrived early as strips of flower-pink mist lifted from the scree like kettle steam, and gauze sheets of mischievous, sniggering Highland midgies pranced in glee that breakfast had arrived.

John and I had a Cobbler tradition. Before going our separate ways we threaded the needle, scrambling through a gap in the rock known as 'Argyll's Eyeglass'. Then, we tottered along the thin ledge to the stack of rock considered the true summit. After that, we split up to do different things. Sometimes I'd belay for John but usually he latched on to other climbers. A rope slung over his shirtless torso and chalk bag dangling from his harness, he'd head to the north face, leaving dad contentedly faffing about sunlit crags and knolls.

I sauntered off to find a lonesome hollow where I disappeared into my own world of long grass and insects, chirruping skylarks and a buzzard circling overhead. I had nothing to do but gaze upon summered hills, distant pinnacles topped by garlands of rose, lilac and indigo cloud. Tufts of cotton grass snagged on heather stems made the Cobbler look like an Alpine meadow in Switzerland.

On that particular day, when I returned from my lone musings, dad was perched on a boulder slugging warm water from a plastic bottle. John was packing up, stuffing karabiners, slings and his rock shoes into an ancient rucksack that always carried a smell reminiscent of horses.

There was something primitive about my brother with his old-fashioned, second-hand gear. It was easy to picture him as an original member of the first-ever climbing group, the Cobbler Club set up 1886. As the features of past and present climbers shadowed his face, a chill shivered through me and for a brief moment, I felt my mountain phantom was talking to me. Not voices-in-the-head type of thing. Nor a premonition or tealeaf reading second sight, but an invisible message that oozed from the landscape and pushed its way inside me. Traces, perhaps, of primordial genes inherited from long-ago ancestors who lived by and listened to the land. I was consumed by a momentary sense of dread that something was going to happen to John. Something bad.

## Stag

I shook the memory away, and realised John was still on the ice sheet, awaiting a response. No matter how much I wanted to head home I couldn't let him down. He let me tag along because he understood my need to be there.

"We'll carry on," I finally said.

Beneath my newly-attached crampons the rigidity of the plateau was shocking. My boots had grown used to sinking into a celestial carpet of snow-buried heather and bracken. I had only taken a few hesitant steps when something caught the corner of my eye. Something moved along the base of the right hand side quarry. I fumbled for the binoculars, and zoomed in on a small herd of red deer, their burnished auburn coats and sallow rumps dulled by the ashen, midday haze.

They tiptoed up the side of an ice-flecked hillock. One by one the hinds tipped over the summit and out of sight. The lone stag at the rear paused on the crest, glancing over the rippled lump of muscle that was his shoulder. His antler branches were clipped by scudding wisps of ice-flicked mist. He looked so regal and proud and majestic, as if posing for Edwin Landseer's 1851 oil painting 'Monarch of the Glen'.

Eyes amber, sprinkled with black-coppery glitter, he seemed to be looking straight at me. I focused the binoculars on his eyes, feeling like an insect trapped in resin as his golden gaze penetrated my soul. For what seemed a long time, but must only have been seconds, we stared at each other.

My first thought was relief that I had something from the day to add to my nature journal, but as a dark shadow briefly blotted the gold light from his eyes, I felt a shiver run through me, the same one I'd felt on that summer's day on the Cobbler. It was a fleeting moment but I sensed the stag was telling me something, a silent phantom bellow, a prelude to something big that was going to happen. Not to me, but to John. The stag's eyes held me frozen on the spot, and I no longer felt the wind's sting or the plateau's inflexibility beneath my boots.

The stag seemed to be telling me that the mountains had a nature where life and death fused into one entity. It was all too deep for me, but something many climbers understood and accepted. The gist of his phantom-message seemed to be that some climbers are destined to stay young and never grow old, and those climbers always kept going. They never turned back.

The stag turned away, clambered up a few steps and then twisted his neck to have one final look at me, as if saying 'remember my words'. Then, with a scuttering of hooves he topped the cap, and followed the trail left by the hinds.

I tucked the binoculars back into my jacket and zipped up, chastising myself for being so stupid. Mountains and deer didn't really talk to human beings. The stag probably hadn't even seen me. It was all in my head, figments of a fickle and vivid imagination, just like my glen-roaming wolves and lynx.

John had stopped, waiting for me to catch up. He too looked regal and proud and majestic. There was something eternal and unearthly about him in that moment: his straightened posture, his flapping jacket, the silvered aura of winter clagging him in. Like the stag, that image of John etched itself into my consciousness like an oil painting.

His contour became a picture shaped by snow and ice, mist and the porcelain sky in the background, filling up with new snow clouds, bulging and bursting like overstuffed pillows. As I trundled along at John's side I couldn't get the stag's 'talking' eyes out of my head. I was just being stupid I reiterated over and over again. Melodramatic. It was just the plateau and the bleakness creating an atmosphere, the ice and the snow, the greyness, the cold, the danger that one of us could slip over

## Stag

the edge and ricochet to the bottom, and the howl of the wind sounding like a long, mournful death rattle.

But the voice of the stag-phantom niggled and niggled.

"John belongs to the mountains," it said. "Be prepared. One day the mountains will take him away. Keep him. Forever!"

What the stag didn't tell me was how soon that day would be.