

Five Poems from *Siberian Spring*

Catherine Greenwood
Independent Artist, United Kingdom
cgreenwood@uniserve.com

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Unearthed

Day funnels down like torchlight
through glory holes eroding
the labyrinth of man-moled tombs.
A ceiling collapses and a digger
scrambles out, shaken. Empty-handed,
no one will go home.

Vision blurs under headlamps
as sweating, they knock slabs
from raw cavern walls, staring
and staring for that one bright seam,
a pale strike of ice-ivory
gleaming through the mud.

The season cycles and wanes
and huge waxen husks shed by
sickle moons emerge, fugitives
sculpted from melting sediment.

Eon-stained, a precious pair of tusks
mounted on a massive skull
sits on the ground like spare parts,
a god's set of handlebars
with no vehicle to steer.

One evening at dusk, from the dimness
of the deepest cave, rings a shout
as the last man out spies an odd stalagmite
poking from the stopes: the tip of
a fable, rhino-horn spongy and punk
as a hunk of sodden wood.

Tails

Dead fish awash in the shallows
shimmer, a tarnished silvery
hoard. *Heads or tails?*

From cliffside strata measuring time
and the slack current slipping past
the scientist gleans no reliable datum
to determine his course. Oily black water flexes
like muscle rippling under iridescent skin.

Two men wait in a loaded boat,
impatient to embark on their journey
home. Urging hurry, one points at the sun
with the neck of an uncorked bottle, offers
him a swig from his own ferry toll.

Hang back or roll? Unschooled in the river's
dark arts, he draws from his pocket
an oracle coin to assay his path with a poll.

Pilgrims

At gloaming, when the current quickens,
they cut the engine to save petrol
and row, pilgrims ploughing a black field
the moon has sown with sheaves of light,
saints bearing a burnished scythe –
sharp tip of mammoth tooth an offering
athwart the stern like some relic
betainted by sooth. *Bad omen, unclean.*

Their own faith is a shield – they believe
in the pact between water and keel.
They ride the river as a beast,
letting it dally to lip the reeds,
allowing its belly to scrape the shoals.
They give the river its head, trust
to the fact of it leading the way.

Snake

What witchery has stitched them in this tapestry?
Tundra and tributary, dark forest and flies.
A condor's wingtips bank and glide,
a ruffling prayer shawl spread against the sky.

The time-carved fortress of frost is on repeat –
as if they circle the moat of a sepulchral keep
illumed by suffocating shrouds of light
as green as Emerauld. Skald of Skeleton,
Bard of Bone, the scientist cannot fathom
the cold cogitations of reptilian deep:

*if the river is a snake
it is swallowing its own tale.*

Unable to untwine a channel from the map,
the pilot rides the river's peristalsis, trapped
by Fate's determined oesophageal slide.

Theme Song

The earth rises up where the river cuts
through peat bog spiked with bone – flagstaffs
heralding a citadel of sludge. They sail
through a veil of mist into a channel dark
as the tunnel of a theme park ride, propellers
churning to slow the boat against time's flow.
The dog on the prow barks as if she's home,
her echo harkening back from barren cliffs –

bleakness, a hellish grey void. They enter
a landscape stripped back to beginnings.
A treeless reach emerges from the fog,
and the muffled sounds of men toiling –
a graveyard scrape of spade against wet soil
so black they might be mining coal –

and, in the hull, the horned skull
humming *it's a small world after all*.

Notes

Italicized lines represent the thoughts of the scientist accompanying Siberian mammoth-tusk hunters. In 'Pilgrims', '*Bad omen, unclean*' references a taboo against touching mammoth cadavers; 'Snake' cites Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1798 poem 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' to describe the aurora borealis; and, in 'Theme Song', the hummed lyrics are from the song for Disney's 'Small World' attraction, 'It's a Small World (After All)'.