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Underland: Reading with Robert Macfarlane

“Jim, if you aren’t happy, we can find another place to cross!” Robert Macfarlane’s voice rang across Red Creek. He had already taken off his boots and rolled up his pants legs, and now he was squatting on the shore some thirty yards away. The sun was shining on a chilly March day in Dolly Sods Wilderness. A thin bit of ice edged the creek, and there was a four-inch covering of snow all around us. I didn’t feel unhappy. In just a few minutes, I was sitting on the rocky shore near Macfarlane, trying to feel my feet enough to dry them and put on my socks.

It seemed like only another few minutes later that this athletic young man was leading me uphill toward a rock outcropping called the Lion’s Head. We made our way up a trail, following an old railroad grade, then we bushwhacked up to the rocks and clambered up to the level top. The views of the plateau behind us were excellent, as if we could walk across stunted, windblown treetops. Red Creek now lay below us a few hundred feet, reddish-brown with tannins, but the best view was straight down into deep cracks and crevasses between giant slabs of white sandstone.

Macfarlane took off through a fringe of rhododendron bushes, crossing to another large outcropping where a group of three young men were waving at us. I looked across and immediately recognized the gigantic profile of the lion’s muzzle, mouth, and eye. Before I could get to the hikers, they were in animated conversation, and in just a moment they were snapping photographs of one another. We huddled together for a few minutes, excited and jabbering, looking out across Red Creek toward the Allegheny Front, rolling green mountains of hemlock and spruce. After circling around snacks and water, the three backpackers said so long and headed back to a campsite farther up the north fork of Red Creek.

Macfarlane showed me where he figured we were, pointing on a tiny Forest Service map of the Sods I had printed off a Monongahela National Forest website. From our vantage point on the Lion's Head, he pointed northwest toward Breathed Mountain, swiveling us back and forth between map and landscape. By his reckoning, we could swing around the east side of the mountain, cut across some relatively flat sections of woods and bogs, and head west toward Stonecoal Run. We would cross the old sods—meadows like mountain balds, cranberry bogs, sphagnum and alder. We should cross a trail that would take us back southwest, in the direction of the Red Creek trailhead.

Fortunately, the snow gave me clear footprints to follow. Climbing down the back of the Lion's Head, I kept my eyes on the ground and picked my way down through thickets of rhododendron, yellow birch, and red spruce saplings. Macfarlane appeared in quick glimpses out ahead or below. We regrouped at the bottom of the rocks, and he once again showed me our route, pointing it out with his pinkie.

Okay.

He took off again.

It honestly wasn't that much of a struggle to keep up. I allowed myself the elder leisure of watching him hike away, keeping him within fifty yards or so. The terrain was rolling, open, snow-covered. We crossed patches of rock and boulder. Underneath the thinning snow I knew we were working through blueberry bushes and other heath plants, and mountain laurel cropped up in thickets. In a while he shouted back at me, "We should be crossing the trail soon, Jim!" In just a moment, I had the old man's pleasure of looking down and finding the traces of trail below me. I called Rob back to the spot.

Looping back to the southwest, we found our way to two more short trails, these marked by signposts. As the sun eased toward the horizon, Rob led us along Big Stonecoal Run, then across an unnamed creek, and finally out along Little Stonecoal to our trailhead and vehicle. Four trails and a couple of bushwhacks. I'm still not entirely sure how many miles we walked.

In 2016, British writer Robert Macfarlane published a paperback pamphlet, *The Gifts of Reading*, containing a seven-part essay that is both personal and public. The intimate tone and autobiographical details establish a direct connection between the writer and reader, parallel to the key friendship between Macfarlane and Don, an older American colleague teaching in China. At the same time, the pamphlet is intended to raise money for the Migrant Offshore Aid Station, best known for its rescue operations in the central Mediterranean Sea in 2014-2017. In the essay, Macfarlane's friend Don eventually dies, but Don's daughter Rachel reports that he had been glad to get the letters and books Macfarlane sent, even after he was no longer able to write back. "‘Reading kept him alive,’ she said, ‘right till the end’" (34).

In *The Gifts of Reading*, Macfarlane lists five books he gives away repeatedly: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*; Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*; Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time of Gifts*; Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*; and J. A. Baker, *The Peregrine* (24). The list presents a mix of genres, styles, and visions. Macfarlane admits that *Lolita* calls for some caution, while Shepherd's *Living Mountain*, a masterpiece of mountain writing about the Cairngorms of Scotland, is the book he has given away most often and in the most extraordinary circumstances. *Blood Meridian* might also call for careful choosing of a recipient—it is without doubt one of the darkest and most disturbingly violent novels I have ever read, though I've read it three times. Macfarlane discusses *A Time of Gifts* at length because Don had given it to him at a crucial juncture, and it proved to be transformative. That leaves Baker's *The Peregrine*, an altogether remarkable narrative of close observation, dense detail, and austere stylistic power.

Macfarlane's most recent reading of *The Peregrine* (1967) fills "Hunting Life," a remarkable chapter in *Landmarks* (2015). The reading combines deep archival research into J. A. Baker's journals and maps, recording his decade-long pursuit of peregrine falcons, and an acute stylistic analysis of Baker's prose. As Macfarlane notes, "*The Peregrine* is not a book about watching a falcon but a book about becoming a falcon" (155). As evidence, he quotes from the opening pages:

Wherever he goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of colour that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye. My pagan head shall sink into the winter land, and there be purified. (Baker 41)

In the course of his pursuit, Baker goes feral, following the falcons so closely that he can find a freshly killed woodpigeon, its head eaten, its bones “still dark red, the blood still wet.” There, Baker finds himself “crouching over the kill, like a mantling hawk. My eyes turned quickly about, alert for the walking heads of men. Unconsciously I was imitating the movements of a hawk, as in some primitive ritual; the hunter becoming the thing he hunts” (95)

In a brilliant recent article called “J. A. Baker’s *The Peregrine* and Its Readers,” David Farrier compares and contrasts the ways in which Macfarlane and Scottish writer Kathleen Jamie read Baker’s classic work. Farrier stresses connectedness, deftly moving through the concepts of “becoming-animal” from French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, political ecology as developed by Bruno Latour, and extinction studies, especially the work of Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Thooren. These writers elucidate theoretical frameworks for reading Baker’s text. A salient paradox, for Farrier, is that “life is in the gift of death” (744). Rose, van Thooren, and James Hatley provide Farrier with insights into the paradox, especially in relation to an era of mass extinctions:

Death on such massive scale is a rupturing of the gift relation; Baker’s cultish fascination with the bird of prey as harbinger of death must therefore be read in light of the wider context of incipient extinction, a culture of death (or a cultural acceptance of animal death he cannot condone) the scale of which robs death of the possibilities of the gift. It is this gift sensibility that informs Macfarlane and Jamie’s readings of Baker, and which, I argue, ensures his enduring relevance as an author of interspecies connectivity to an era of mass species extinction. (747)

Farrier effectively recuperates Baker and *The Peregrine* for contemporary readers and writers, arguing that Rose's "gift-sensibility" creates both a "shared dependency between human and non-human" (751) and, implicitly, a parallel shared dependency between writers and readers. In Macfarlane's case, Farrier focuses on the chapter "Saltmarsh" from *The Wild Places* (269-98), arguing that the narrative creates a social sense of the East Anglian landscape that includes human and non-human, distinct from Baker's "scornful misanthropy" (750). In Jamie's case, Farrier finds that interconnectivity is woven into everyday events and activities, affording ample opportunities for attachment and transcendence within the quotidian (752-55).

Farrier shows incisively how the two contemporary writers both honor Baker's *The Peregrine* and read his work critically, finding their own ways of understanding latent meanings in the work and making it newly relevant for our present situation. Farrier also shows that, despite their differences as writers, Jamie and Macfarlane read *The Peregrine* in similar ways. Both emphasize the social connectedness of landscapes and the entangled, enmeshed qualities of human and nonhuman. Both figure landscapes of inclusion while they recognize the ways in which human beings have chosen to dominate landscapes and the nonhuman. For both, writing is a means of reading an earlier work like *The Peregrine*, and the gift of that reading is to make a place for Baker in the contemporary world, the "era of mass species extinction." If, as Macfarlane notes in *Landmarks*, "Before you become a writer you must first become a reader" (11), the reader and the writer share a common world.

The second day, we entered Dolly Sods from the west and stayed in the North Area, a large plateau of open country. Once again, Macfarlane seemed to read the map and the landscapes simultaneously, translating them easily into one another. We skirted a hill called Blackberry Knob, then struck north into flatlands of what looked like alpine tundra. This was all land that was never settled, just hard-used by loggers at the turn of the twentieth century. Heath barrens. The real giants were ghosts now. Gigantic hemlocks and red spruce, and tales of a white oak tree thirteen feet in diameter. The loggers would clear

out an area with draft horses and temporary railroad lines, then move the tracks and animals and men to another, fresh section.

Over the course of the day, Macfarlane led us over another set of trails that formed a loop around the North Area. Around midday, he took us through a stand of hardwoods descending toward a creek and onto one of the trails. We stayed together, keeping up a steady conversation.

As we descended toward the creek, I found myself telling Rob about my friendship with the writer Barry Lopez. I knew he appreciated Lopez's work, especially *Arctic Dreams*, on a profound level, as one writer reading another writer. It seemed important to register Lopez's struggles with his work, which at that time was the big book *Horizon*, a work that Lopez had been committed to for over twenty years. I told Rob how Lopez had described to me his habit of picking up beaver sticks on his hikes around his home in Oregon, and how the sticks represented a kind of talisman for him, an encouraging command to "Keep Going!" I also told Rob how Lopez had been mocked for his idealism regarding the beaver sticks, a younger writer making fun of the reverence Lopez shows toward the numinous quality wild animals can show us. Just then, we turned downhill to the creek and walked directly up to a huge beaver dam.

"It's a damn beaver construction zone!" Macfarlane yelled.

The size of the dam made us giddy. Or maybe it was the way the beaver construction zone answered our conversation. We rummaged for ten minutes in the dozens of beaver sticks at our feet, some of them as thick as an arm or leg. The pond behind the dam stretched for nearly an acre. Every stick showed toothmarks on both ends, as if the beavers had shaped each stick to precise measurements, known only to them.

"Jim," Rob said, "we must take one of these sticks back to send to Barry!" And so we did.

Macfarlane introduces the idea of the Anthropocene in Chapter 1 of *Underland*, "Descending." Despite any suspicions we might harbor about the aggrandizing connotations of the term, he finds it useful in

designating our present situation, “an epoch of immense and often frightening change on a planetary scale” (13-14). One frightening aspect of the Anthropocene is that “things that should have stayed buried are rising up unbidden” (14), but the underland can also produce a more capacious view. Deep time perspective, the proper chronology for the underland, can battle against despair and inertia: “At its best, a deep time awareness might help us see ourselves as part of a web of gift, inheritance and legacy stretching over millions of years past and millions to come, bringing us to consider what we are leaving behind for the epochs and beings that will follow us” (15). This gift sensibility directly recalls the web of readers and writers, humans and nonhumans, that make up the world of life and death. In “Descending,” Macfarlane reflects on his fifteen years of writing books about “the relationships between landscape and the human heart” (17). To his own surprise, the trajectory of his writing career has taken him from a personal love for mountains to his “most communal” book:

If the image at the centre of much that I have written before is that of the walker’s placed and lifted foot, the image at the heart of these pages is that of the opened hand, extended in greeting, compassion or the making of a mark Seeing photographs of the early hand-marks left on the cave walls of Maltravieso, Lascaux or Sulawesi, I imagine laying my own palm precisely against the outline left by those unknown makers. I imagine, too, feeling a warm hand pressing through from within the cold rock, meeting mine fingertip to fingertip in open-handed encounter across time.

(18)

The “placed and lifted foot” is a direct echo of Macfarlane’s reading of Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* and of his own grandfather’s final walk in *The Old Ways* (201, 205). Hands and their marks recur in *Underland*, but perhaps the most powerful appearance comes at the very end, in the short chapter “Surfacing.” Macfarlane and his four-year-old son Will visit the Nine Wells Wood, a pool of nine springs in the chalk uplands near their home in Cambridge, England. Eventually, Will runs ahead of his father, out of a tunnel of blackthorn into bright sunlight. His image is swallowed by the light, as if the boy were

burned up by it. For a quick moment, a vision of ashen, colorless death; then, just as quickly, life and color flood back into the world:

I run to catch up with him, calling loudly, and he turns to face me at the edge of the wood. As I kneel down on the earth he raises a hand in the air, fingers spread wide. I reach my hand towards his and meet it palm to palm, finger to finger, his skin strange as stone against mine. (425)

The hands reach across thousands of years, and they reach from one generation to the next. They touch in greeting, in compassion, in fear and love. They touch in making a mark like an artwork in an ancient cave, or like an echo in a book. The echoing image of hands suggests the power of language to form connections, to function as a social network for communication as much as individual expression. At the same time, the images of “cold rock” and “strange as stone” imbue the echoing hands with an uncanny, unsettling quality. Not all hand-marks are intimate and heart-warming.

Macfarlane is attracted, as a writer and reader, to the particularity of landscape features and the specificity of words used, in whatever language or dialect. He shows a strong sense of delight in precision and exactitude, in sounds and visual images, and that delight is always coupled with the *thing*—not only the material object, but “a narrative not fully known” and “the unknowability of larger chains of events” (*Landmarks* 33). For Macfarlane, the language of landscapes is a *thing*. The first and second chapters of *Landmarks*, “Word-Hoard” and “A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook,” develop big questions concerning the multiple connections between landscape and language. As Macfarlane explains, the glossaries in *Landmarks* were inspired in 2007 by the “Peat Glossary” created by Finlay McLeod and friends on the Isle of Lewis and, that same year, by a new edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, which deleted common words of natural landscapes and added a number of words having to do with digital realities. *Acorn* deleted; *voice-mail* added. The questions scale beyond numbers of words in a dictionary.

The work of certain writers is one answer to the desecration and devaluing of landscapes and languages, and as in *The Gifts of Reading*, the essays in *Landmarks* feature evocative treatments of writers like Nan Shepherd, J. A. Baker, Barry Lopez, and Roger Deakin, who use words to treat landscapes as specific, valuable, sacred places. Macfarlane singles out for special praise *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*, a collaborative collection of essays on landscape terms edited by Lopez and Debra Gwartney. In a remarkable development that may owe a collective debt to *Home Ground*, the “Peat Glossary,” and the *OJD*, moreover, the recent book *The Lost Words* (2017) is a practical exercise in counter-desecration and collaboration. Together with the artist Jackie Morris, Macfarlane produced a beautifully illustrated book of acrostic “spells” to restore the words lost in the 2007 *Oxford Junior Dictionary*. The book has been adopted widely in British schools and other institutions, and it promises to give a new generation of readers a renewed appreciation of landscapes and the words we use to name and describe them. Indeed, the book has reached a wide audience, as Macfarlane described it recently in the 16 January 2019 issue of the *Guardian*:

The wild life of *The Lost Words* continues to amaze us daily. Grassroots campaigns have so far raised money [to place copies of the book in every primary and special school](#) in all of Scotland, half of England and a quarter of Wales. The book is used by charities and carers working with dementia sufferers, with refugees, with survivors of domestic abuse, with childhood cancer patients, and with people in terminal care. It has been adapted for dance, outdoor theatre, avant-garde classical music, and thousands of school projects. A copy is now in every hospice in the country, and the new Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital at Stanmore has four levels decorated floor to ceiling with Jackie’s art – the book become a building. *The Lost Words* has also been spray-painted by graffiti artists all over a substation in woods near Cardiff; book-as-building in a rather different way.

And as *Spell Songs* it is shifting shape again – into a folk music concert and album.

To return to David Farrier's argument, we should remember that "life is in the gift of death." For all the transformative work engendered by spells, there remain gaps and losses that words cannot transform. One word for that present condition of absences and gaps is the Anthropocene.

In *Underland's* chapter titled "Dark Matter," Macfarlane connects the epoch and the perspective:

Perhaps above all the Anthropocene compels us to think forwards in deep time, and to weigh what we will leave behind, as the landscapes we are making now will sink into strata, becoming underlands. What is the history of things to come? What will be our future fossils? As we have amplified our ability to shape the world, so we become more responsible for the long afterlives of that shaping. The Anthropocene asks of us the question memorably posed by the immunologist Jonas Salk: "Are we being good ancestors?" (77)

This is the question that ghosts *Underland*, most tellingly in Part Three, "*Haunting* (The North)." The Anthropocene haunts Part Three persistently, and Macfarlane's journeys into the underland become increasingly urgent in confronting the ethical dimensions of being an ancestor and asking the question, "What is the history of things to come?"

Another name for this ghosting is "eeriness," a quality that Macfarlane finds broadly distributed across British culture, in music, film, photography, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. For Macfarlane as a reader and writer, this is more than "an excess of hokey woo-woo," and it is certainly "very far from 'nature writing,' whatever that once was, and into a mutated cultural terrain that includes the weird and the punk as well as the attentive and the devotional. Among the shared landmarks of this terrain are ruins, fields, pits, fringes, relics, buried objects, hilltops, falcons, demons and deep pasts. In much of this work, suppressed forces pulse and flicker beneath the ground and within the air (capital, oil, energy, violence, state power, surveillance), waiting to erupt or to condense" (*Guardian* 10 April 2015). In a very recent article on the upsurge of a new animism in contemporary writing about landscape, Macfarlane quotes the

British writer and artist Richard Skelton: “Engaging with ‘the eerie’ is fundamentally an acknowledgement of life beyond our own species ... about probing that complex, troubling relationship between humans and others” (*Guardian* 2 November 2019).

The five chapters of “*Haunting* (The North)” take us from a largely solitary adventure in “Red Dancers” to large communal questions posed by the Anthropocene in “The Hiding Place.” Both “Red Dancers” and “The Edge” take place along the northwest coast of Norway; both “The Blue of Time” and “Meltwater” take place on glaciers in Greenland. “The Hiding Place” refers to Onkalo, a nuclear waste storage facility on Olkiluoto Island in southwest Finland, the “darkest place” Macfarlane visits in all the underland journeys he recounts (416).

The tone of the eerie surfaces persistently through the chapters of Part Three. In “Red Dancers,” for example, a deserted fishing village and a bay strewn with human debris lead Macfarlane to a memory: “Something an archaeologist said to me in Oslo about deep time flies to my mind: *Time isn’t deep, it is always already all around us. The past ghosts us, lies all about us less as layers, more as drift.* Here that seems right, I think. We ghost the past, we are *its* eerie” (273). After this tricky memory, Macfarlane reads the trace of a “thin path” leading toward the cave of Kollhellaren. As he remarks on his first night on the coast, “‘thin places’ are those sites in a landscape where the borders between worlds or epochs feel at their most fragile. Such locations were, for the *peregrini* or wandering devouts of AD 500 to 1000, often to be found on westerly headlands, islands, caves, coasts and other brinks. This place, now, is one of the thinnest I have ever been” (270-71). Climbing the old path, Macfarlane’s footsteps ghost those of the past. And now the reading deepens. The physical “movement within time” leads to a “summer’s night 3,000 years ago” (273). Macfarlane imagines ancient painters gathering in the high-ceilinged cavern above the sea, dipping their fingers in a cup of stone and drawing dancing figures with a red paste made of rock, earth, rainwater, and spit (274). A fingertip draws a line through time, to the anthropologist Hein Bjerck’s discovery of the cave in 1992, and then to “a late-winter’s day in the now, and a man alone on the bay near the cave” (276).

Other images connect the painters, Bjerck, and Macfarlane through time and place: the churning sounds of the Maelstrom, out at sea; sea-eagles flying overhead, wingtips near the cliff; a sheer drop to the water below.

The red dancers are themselves the most properly eerie figures in the narrative. Macfarlane enters the Kollhellaren cave and at first can't see them at all. When the dancers materialize, they are uncanny—not fully human and yet definitely human: “These figures are *ghosts* all dancing together, and I am a ghost too, and there is a conviviality to them—to *us*—to the thousands of years for which they have been dancing here together” (278). This emotional meeting across and through time is an effect of reading, transforming a solitary adventure into an experience of conviviality, the sense of joyous festival (*convivium*) as well as the underlying meaning of living together.

The haunting takes on other colors. In “The Edge,” the underlying threat of Big Oil beneath Bjørnar Nicolaisen's fishing grounds blends with Edgar Allan Poe's short story “Descent into the Maelstrom.” In “The Blue of Time,” at the abandoned American base Camp Century, now a dump for fuel, radioactive coolant, and other pollutants, Macfarlane discovers the “master trope” of his underland journeys: “troublesome history though long since entombed is emerging again” (330). The blue ice of Apusiajik glacier is a readable archive of deep time (338-39), but the retreating glaciers are leaving behind “ghost glaciers,” and hiking on Apusiajik leaves Macfarlane and his friends silent, thick-tongued (364). In “Meltwater,” the glaciers are shifting so quickly that the landscape becomes a ghost itself, unsettled and unsettling. A “black shining pyramid, sharp at its prow,” upsurges at the face of the Knud Rasmussen glacier, “and we are dancing and swearing and shouting, appalled and thrilled to have seen this repulsive, exquisite thing rise up that should never have surfaced, this star-dropped berg-surge that has taken three minutes and 100,000 years to conclude” (377-78). Finally, in “The Hiding Place” of Onkalo, Finland, and the warning signs for some future beings who might happen upon the toxic nuclear waste site. How will they read the signs, and how must we read them? As Macfarlane describes this final descent, “the belly of

Onkalo is not the deepest place that I have been during the years of underland travel, but it seems at this point the darkest. I have a strong sense of the weight of time above and around us, bearing down on veins and tissue” (416)

Time and again, Robert Macfarlane reads the signs deeply. He reads with both history and memory, continually calling for us to deepen our own reading. The hand he reaches out to us is both convivial and restrained. He enriches that image characteristically at the end of “The Hiding Place,” first by offering a reading and then by telling an apparently simple story. Deep in the terminal chamber of Onkalo, Macfarlane sees a handprint in the dust, and it leads him to recall ancient handprints in caves, the red dancers, a spray paint handprint in the Paris catacombs, and the helping hand of a friend hauling him out of a glacial moulin. To his own surprise, the memories spark a feeling of hope and a possible future. He recalls a salient passage from Jedediah Purdy’s *After Nature*, focusing on how we might change our ways and avert disaster, either because of fear or because of love. Fear, writes Purdy, will “stay the human hand ... just short of being burnt or broken.” But love “keeps the hand poised, extended in greeting or in an offer of peace. This gesture is the beginning of collaboration, among people but beyond us, in building our next home” (419).

Then comes the simple story: Macfarlane has a flat tire on his way off Olkioluto Island, and his rental car has no jack. He is far from town, the temperature is dropping, and the road is icy. He does not know what to do. Five minutes later, a worker from Onkalo stops to help: “He has a jack. Ten minutes later he has changed the tyre and stowed the flat in the boot. He cleans the oil and grease from his fingers with a cloth. Then he puts out a hand, I shake it in gratitude, and we drive off one after the other into the darkness” (420).

Later, we perched atop boulders that seemed like misplaced glacial erratics from the far North. We faced away from the wind biting across the high plain, sitting at nearly four thousand feet. Rob told me the story

of an incredible solo trip he made on the arctic coast of Norway. The story would appear later in the chapter “Red Dancers,” in *Underland*. But this telling in West Virginia was different from the written version. He left out the learning and the poetry, focusing instead on reading the wild landscapes.

Winter above the Arctic Circle, hiking across frozen flatlands toward a steep set of cliffs called the Wall. Working his way to the northwest coast of the Lofoten archipelago, beyond the end of the only road. He found himself in wind, snow, rain, sleet, clouds down to the ground. Helmet, crampons, ice-axe. He had to find his way across the Wall by climbing up a steep gully and smashing through a thin cornice of icy snow. Finding the right gully, first of all. And then he had to descend a sheer cliff down to the shore. Over three days, he made his way southwest to a cave called Kollhellaren, reading the shorescape to find an abandoned settlement, a mossy green trace of a path, and then a climb up to the rocks again. And there he found a thin place held by red dancers. In our telling, he described how he found his way in the roar of waves and the crashing sound of the Maelstrom out at sea, how he camped in the deep moss and heather of the Arctic and listened to rain and sleet and snow on the fly of the tent. He told about the birds along the coast, the sea eagles flying near the cave. But he couldn’t tell about the dancers.

“Sorry,” he said. “I have to let you read that bit.”

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