

Reindeer Herders

We move with the herd,
owning nothing we cannot carry,
stop with them by wood and water,
watch for wolves.

Our lives have merged.
Their flesh is our food, their milk our drink,
their skins keep us clothed, shod and sheltered,
their backs bear our burdens.

The reindeer follow ancient route maps
embossed on the brain's soft topography,
pass sure-footed along river valleys,
swamps, forests, plateaus, rocky ridges.

Hooves can be cleats on slippery ice
or spread flat to skim snowfields.
Practise has made us nimble in their wake.
Where the herd halts we set up camp.

Across the white distance, ravening
shapes slink over snow, melt
into tree shadows. Under an opal sky,
water flashes molten grey and silver.

By morning dark paw-holes
will pockmark the trampled snow
where moss and lichens
were nosed out and grazed.

All night their warm breaths make
restless lacework on the freezing air,
their antlers bristle like forests of bare branches.
They know our voices and are not afraid.

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