

meadowyarn

the light inside

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part four : polecat/pull

Polecat

The dog draws my attention to it. It is laying on its back, paws up, claws protruding, eyes closed. About a foot long, I estimate; it is slender, its fur is dirty black; beige in parts, and coarse-looking, slightly matted. Its top lip curls back, revealing tiny teeth. They look sharp. It looks stiff; solid. It reminds me of the time I came downstairs in the morning and found our cat, dead, in her basket.

‘Leave!’ I urge Scout and he moves away, happy to sniff elsewhere. This is not the tempting, pungent, rotting flesh of a week-dead rabbit, or the squawking, clumsy, flurry of a pheasant flushed from sleep, he doesn’t want to eat it. I think it’s a ferret or a polecat. I’m tempted to find a way to pick it up. Take it home.

A buzzard circles. I imagine it is also looking at the dead animal, wondering if it is worth investigating further. I know that owls and kestrels hunt using the ultra-violet tracks of urine that field mice and voles leave in the tussocky grass; like using night-vision goggles. I remember a police helicopter hovering as a suspect fled across garden fences; looking for the body heat glow, a ‘Ready Brek’ image for the pilot. Radios crackling in pursuit. I don’t know if Buzzards are the same, I don’t know enough about birds of prey to know if they scavenge carrion. The last dead body lay unclaimed. Skin matte, fading to grey. He stayed in the hospital cold storage after the post-mortem – until the council was sure no one wanted him.

I wonder how long it has lain there, in its quiet repose, undisturbed. It looks to be intact, there is no obvious wound, exposing guts, entrails, speeding up its decay. The buzzard calls, a high, unmistakable ‘pew pew’, and I see it has been joined by a second. Two of them, circling, finding the thermal updraft, wings stretched, eyes sharp.

I take a photo of the carcass with my phone and we continue, Scout and I, and the rest of our walk is uneventful. We don’t bump into Bernie this morning. I think she would be

interested to see the dead animal and I imagine she might be able to correctly identify it. I will show her the photos when I next see her.

Back home I Google 'polecat' and 'ferret' and I am still not sure which it is. I post my photo on Twitter, alerting the local wildlife trust to its presence. Polecat, they say. Wow, I say. That's exciting. They don't reply. Polecats are not this year's focus. This elusive creature, visible only because of its death is seen and unseen. They don't care. No authority wants to record its passing; its proof of existence.

Further afield there is more interest. A man in Staffordshire would like the skull for his British mammal collection. Can I skeletonise it? I read about burying the carcass in sand to protect it from digging scavengers, then eventually removing the rotted flesh and cleaning the bones with hydrogen peroxide. No, I cannot.

The next day we take the same route, Scout and I. It is still there. No different. No more, or less, dead. Nothing wants it. The lonely, alcoholic in the bed-sit. Two months they said. The neighbours not bothering to check if he was OK until they could smell that he wasn't.

As we are walking back up the narrow path between meadow and marsh, we meet Bernie. She is drawing, resting her sketch pad against a fence post as she stares intently at a patch of rough tussocky grass in front of her. She is wearing a long pinafore, with capricious pockets, her grey hair is swept up on top of her head and her lined face is marked with sun spots and freckles; a complexion I have come to associate with a country life, lived outside, exposed to the elements.

'Smeuse,' she says as if it requires no further explanation.

I look at her, at the point in front of her, and at her sketchpad. She senses my confusion.

'It's an old word, from French I think. It's a hole or track, worn through at the base of a hedgerow, or in long grass, by small animals; a tunnel if you like? Shrews, voles, field mice, you know?' She looks at me as if wondering whether she is going to have to describe a vole

for me next. A smile twitches at the corners of her mouth. She is in awe of my lack of knowledge of the environment I now inhabit but encouraging of my enthusiasm.

‘The shape is perfect, like a nest. Made with little effort and no forethought. Like the opening to a vessel. A perfection I can only aspire to replicate with clay.’

We stand, contemplating the natural geometries all around us and I remember the carcass.

‘Have you seen the dead polecat?’ I ask. ‘Over by the field entrance. It’s been there for a couple of days, completely intact, nothing seems to have touched it.’

‘No, I shall have to go and investigate. A polecat? Are you sure?’ I see Bernie as a custodian of these tracks and paths and I am pleased that her interest is piqued.

‘I put a picture up on the internet and the wildlife warden says it’s a polecat but they didn’t seem bothered.’

‘Well, I’ve not seen one around here before. The odd ferret hybrid possibly and plenty of stoats but I didn’t think polecats had been recorded this far east.’

We part with thoughts of animal tracks and passings. I wander along the trail, Scout snuffles and noses the overgrown edges of the path, cut through the encroaching vegetation to allow dog walkers and wildlife watchers to circumnavigate the marsh. I glance over my shoulder as I reach the kissing gate and Bernie is still standing, looking out across the meadow. I know she might be here for most of the day, lost in thought and pencil marks on paper. She was chatty today but sometimes she’s so engrossed in her sketching, or her clay, or just her thoughts that she barely acknowledges us. I know that she has lived alone for many years, in this isolated place, and I wonder if I will become insular, self-contained like Bernie if I stay here for as long.

The next morning the polecat has gone. Completely. Nothing remains, no tufts of fur, no patch of flattened grass, no indentation, no trace. We walk and I wonder what happened to it. Maybe the reserve warden was interested after all and it has been taken away for further

study. Maybe the bone collector decided it was worth a three-hundred-mile round-trip but I doubt it. Maybe a buzzard swooped and took it whole. More likely a fox dragged it away.

Pull

I feel its weight above me, pressing down, gently. I map its shape, to prepare myself. With a little help, I will gradually claim it; this thing that has been left. In time, we will become one. The stuff of it will become the stuff of me. Inseparable. Intertwined. It is me. I am it.

The fur will lose its oils, the fibres opening to let in water and then it will start to break apart. The sun will bake it, dry it, it will become brittle, it will turn to dust. Beneath, the flesh will decompose, ants and beetles and flies all helping it to transform; into food, into a place for things to be born. It will eventually liquefy, seep between the bones and into me.

The skeleton is always the last to leave. It will be here, waiting to be reclaimed, for many years, maybe hundreds. Bone is the bridge. The connection between me and everything else. It will sink, it will take on my rich peat stain, it will move apart, the limbs separating but it will stay, in me, with me. It will persist.