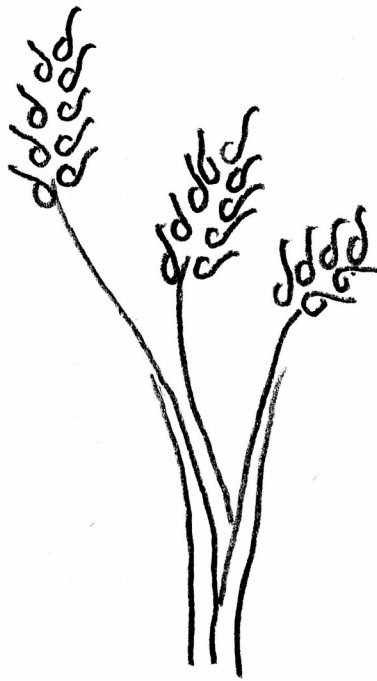


The weather had changed early. Hungo noticed the snow on the mountains, and we began to gather our things for the journey to warmer lands. He now wore his antlers. He had become the deer that walks as a man. Tufts of feathers surrounded the tiny gourds that hung from either side of his head. They rattled when he moved.

There were sheep on a nearby hill. I pointed to them. "Should we hunt?" I asked. He looked at the sheep. Then back at the snow and sniffed the air. "There will always be sheep." My eyes dropped to the ground. We were several families, and I sensed hunger ahead. We began our journey.



The snow remained on the mountains, but the valley we followed stayed clear and the water in our carry skins did not freeze at night. We followed the river when we could. Still Hungo urged us on.



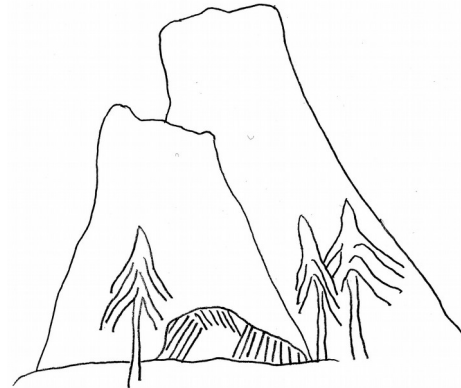
We paused to dig tubers and gather sweet grasses and seeds as we journeyed and ate sparingly of our dried meat. On the third day the last was gone. Although he did not want to, Hungo ordered the hunt. We would have to camp a few days to hunt and dry the meat. And this time was preciously spent. Those who did not join the hunt gathered seeds to grind and make bread for the journey.

The hunt did not go well. The game was scarce. We were able to find provisions that would last a few days, but not much longer. Hungo did not want to linger. We would journey, and then, in a few days, perhaps there would be more game and better hunting.

The snow grew on the mountain tops and now was beginning to dust the valley floor. It was colder. The water skins had to be

stored near the fire to keep from freezing overnight.

Now, we paused only a day to hunt before moving again. And, the storm did not relent in its bitterness.



We moved up from the valley floor to the edge of the mountains. Boulders and loose rock littered the ground and the going was more difficult. We had left the river and its water source below. But, there was chance of shelter in caves among the cliffs. We could camp there for a few days, long enough to hunt and rest before continuing on.

We searched for five days, hunting when we could, before we found a cave large and secure enough to offer us sanctuary. I wondered where were the sheep that Hungo said would always be there.

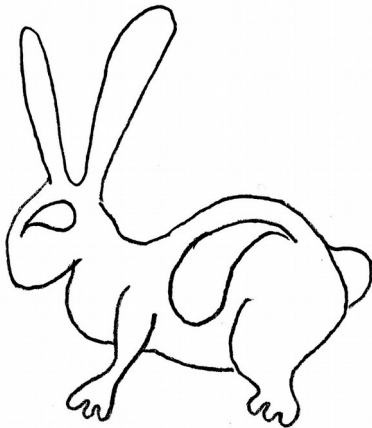
We gathered wood and stored it in the cave. A fire was lit and we slept. In the morning, some of us hunted and the rest searched for seeds and grasses and brought water from the river below. After a few days, we were able to set aside some stores, but not enough

to allow the journey to continue. Hungo saw that we could not remain here long. The winter would continue to become more severe and we would not be able to find much more food.

That evening, he performed a ritual dance for the next day's hunt. He hoped that our people's spirits would be raised by the dance. They would sleep well and be filled with confidence. We shared more food than was wise that evening. But, he ordered it for their hope.

Later, he spoke to me. He would go away for a while and I was to look after the needs of our people. He said he would return as soon as possible and that if he was not back by morning that I should lead the hunt.

He had not returned by dawn. I informed the others of his wishes and we began to prepare. I went to the cave mouth and



studied the sky. The clouds were dense and gray, but no snow was falling. I asked the Spirits to guide me and hoped that they would lead us to game.

By mid day, we had caught a few rabbits. The weather turned worse

and the snow began to fall heavily. We decided to return to the cave with what we had.

Hungo had still not returned. Our people began to dress the meat and prepare a meager meal. I went to the cave mouth to stand and wait for Hungo.

Just before dusk, he returned. He approached slowly through the snow. In the dim light, I saw he was leading something. As he grew closer, I saw that he had four deer leashed on leather thongs. I rejoiced that he had found food and called to our



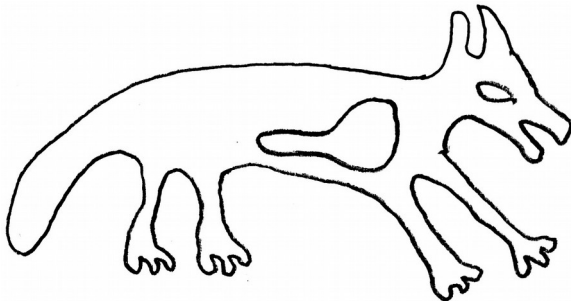
people to come and greet him. We helped him lead the deer into the shelter of the cave. We tethered the deer close to the entrance so they would not be too frightened by the fire and could get water from the snow.

Hungo came forward to warm himself by the fire. Several of the people wanted to slaughter the deer, but he stopped them.

He began to explain. The deer were for our food, but we must not take what we do not need. This confused our people. Then, he

told of his journey.

He had traveled across the valley and into the forest. There, he paused and called to the guardians of the forest. He spoke of our need and asked for food for our people. He waited.



After a time, a wolf approached him. He was Konote, the warrior chieftain of the wolves. He asked Hungo what he would trade for this large quantity of food. Hungo

asked Konote what would be of use to the wolves. Konote said that their medicine chief had been killed in a fall the previous winter and there was no one who had been trained in his knowledge that could replace him. Konote said that if Hungo would be their medicine chief and teach those of their young who chose to follow the path of this wisdom, Konote would provide enough food for our people to safely reach our winter lands. Hungo agreed.

I protested. "This is not a good bargain! Four deer will not see us to our winter lands. Why did Hungo agree to this?"

He looked at me with tired eyes. "The bargain is made. We

cannot undo it. Soon you will understand what the agreement means.”

I was confused. It did not seem right. I thought the wolves were tricking us so that we might provide meat for them in the winter. Without Hungo to lead us, we would suffer. Our knowledge and power could never equal his. I felt we were lost. The others also voiced their protest.

But, Hungo silenced them and they obeyed. “You will follow my instructions. The deer may be killed for our food, but only one at a time. When you have eaten and prepared meat for the journey, you will go on to the winter lands. And, when you arrive there, you release the remaining deer into the forest.”

I shook my head in wonder. Why should we bother to release the remaining deer? How could four deer possibly last us to the winter lands?

Still, Hungo insisted. “You must heed the bargain that I have made with Konote. He is a fierce warrior and I do not think he would take kindly to your disobedience.”

Against their will, our people agreed to hold sacred Hungo’s bargain and do as he bade.

They killed one of the deer. As our people bent to the task of preparing the fire and cooking the meat, Hungo took me aside. “I have a task for you, please come with me.” I followed him away from the camp and down the valley trail. We walked in silence for some time and finally he stopped. “This is a good place. It is a place of power. Much will happen here.”



He raised his hand and pointed down the trail. There stood a wolf and at its side a stag. I wondered that the stag showed no fear of the wolf. They seemed to be companions. The wolf looked at Hungo and bowed its head. The stag came towards us and stopped a few feet away.

Hungo told me to kneel. As I did, the stag approached and knelt facing me. Hungo laid one hand on top of the stag's head. He then laid his other hand on top of my head and pressed my forehead against that of the stag's. He began to softly chant. My mind became distant and I could not make out his words.

I became aware of a flood of cold water washing over me. Bright light flashed on its rippling surface. Strange beings swam

through the flood and became part of me.

I do not know how long this flood endured, but, after a time, it seemed to lessen. Until, finally, it was no more. I could hear the last words of Hungo's chant and felt the night air against my face. I opened my eyes as his hand left my head. I was startled to find that the stag was gone. I thought that I still felt the warmth of its fur against my brow. Hungo bade me stand. I felt a heaviness on my head. Reaching up, I found I now wore the stag's antlers. Hungo faced me and pressed his hands to either side of my face. He closed his eyes and his knowledge began to flow into me. We stood this way until dawn and I learned all that was in his being.

The sun was warm on our skin as he lifted his hands from my face. "It is done. Now, I must leave and you will care for our people." He took a few steps towards where the wolf patiently waited.

"Will we meet again?" I asked.

He turned back to face me. "I do not know." He raised his hand in farewell.

My eyes dropped in sorrow. I would miss him greatly. When I looked up, both he and the wolf were gone.

I returned to our people.

They were preparing for journey. They had only killed one deer the night before, but were well fed and had smoked what meat they did not eat so that it could be carried with us. And, there seemed to be a great quantity of preserved meat.

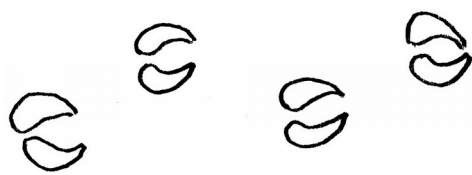
I went to where the remaining deer were tethered. I brought a handful of grasses to give to them to eat. But, the deer refused the food. They would only lick the snow for water. I marveled. There should have been three deer. But now, again, there were four. I understood the greatness of Konote's gift to us and why the bargain had seemed so severe.

We continued to our winter lands. When the hunt could not provide and we had need, we ate of the deer, but never killed more than one at a time. The next morning the sacrificed deer was replaced, and again, we always had four.

As we journeyed, we occasionally saw a wolf in the distance keeping pace with us. I would smile and sing thanks to Konote.

When we reached our winter lands, I told our people that we must release the deer. Some did not wish to do this. They had become accustomed to the security the deer provided and were

afraid of hunger. But, Hungo had bargained for us and I would not let them go back on his word.



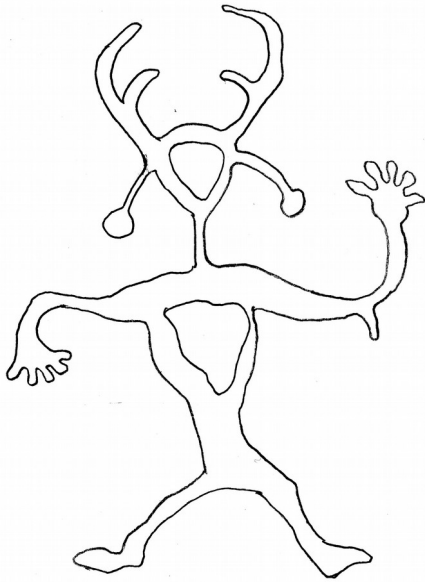
So, the deer were released. A wolf appeared and herded them into the forest.

When the winter snows began to thaw, we began to prepare for our journey to the summer lands.

A few days out, the wolf and four deer appeared at the edge of the forest. They journeyed with us at a distance. And, I knew they would be there if we had need. But again, I knew we must respect their distance and value Hungo's bargain.

We paused for a few days at the cave to hunt and gather. It was decided among our people that this place should be known as a place of sanctuary and celebration during our people's annual journeys. We would dance and feast to honor the blessings we received here.

I left our people during the feast and wandered away to where I had last seen Hungo.



There I took a stone and carved his image on the wall, with his hand raised in farewell.

I will go down to the edge of the forest and speak with the wolf who tends the deer. I will ask him to convey our gratitude to Konote and ask if he has news of Hungo. I smile at the memory of him. Later, this summer, when the gourds are ripe, I too, will fashion rattles for my antlers.

That spring saw our people strong as we traveled to the summer lands. New grasses were abundant and we hoped for good hunting.

We traveled far and entered many lands that were new to us. Following a cut between the mountains, it took us to a pass. There we paused to look down at what lay before us. As we stood there, a wind came up from behind surrounding and gently carrying us forward. It whispered softly, urging us down into the valley below,

which was wide and followed a broad river. It was wider than any other river we had found. Cliffs ran along the near edge, which gave us hope of shelter. Soon they drew back and the valley lay between them and the river. Marshes with tall grasses hugged the river, and above them stood a flat of the cloud trees. There the ground became drier and offered occasional clearings where our people could gather to work hides and prepare food.

Across the river the land was wide and slowly rose in the haze to distant mountains. It was a vast country, one that did not welcome our people. We chose to not explore there. It was too big and we could not imagine settling there.

Our side of the river was a pleasant place, so we lingered there and began to explore the valley.

We found that the marshes were fed by springs of sweet water, so we cleared some of them for wells to drink from. Some of the water was very warm and we followed to its source. This was a very good find and we cleared a large pool at this spring for bathing.

Our people were happy here and many days found us enjoying the bounty of this valley.

A wind whispered to me and I followed it to return to the pass at the entrance to the valley. I stood there looking at the surrounding rocks. A large outcropping had the appearance of a man's face, but many times larger. I stared at him for a while and slowly he turned to look at me. "Who are you?", he asked.

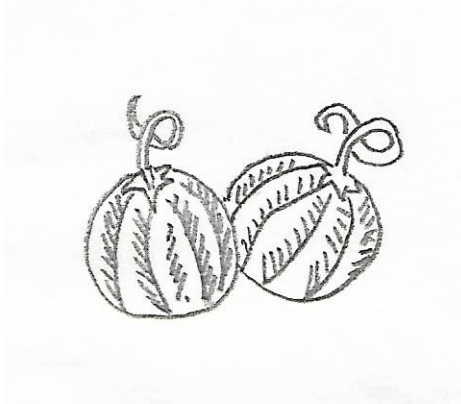


"I am the caretaker for our people. We came this way hoping for good shelter and hunting. We do not mean harm to you or to this valley and will not stay if we are not welcome."

"I am Hikiti, the wind that blew your people here and I listen to the song of this valley. Your people do no harm and may stay here and live gently."

"I thank you, Hikiti. If there is a way we can serve you, please tell us."

“Heed my voice when I call out and we will serve each other.”
He then became silent and turned back to stone. And, I returned to the valley.



I found a patch of buffalo gourd growing near the wooded area. There were several gourds that would be good for my rattles and I selected two of them. I returned daily to visit them and talk about my plans for them.

I knew I would need cords to tie them and began to search for the cord plants. Near the river I found a field of them. And this was good as the river and marshes contained several kinds of fish and we would need to make sturdy nets.

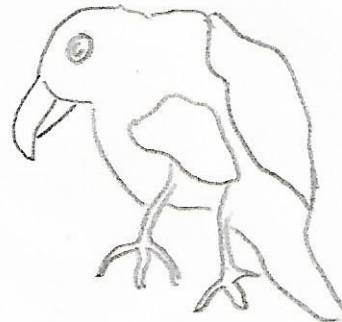


We pulled several of the green plants and began to prepare them. And with a flat stone broke open the wood stalks. They would need to be soaked before we could pull out the soft inner fibers.

The river was fast and deep, so we cut out a small shallow pool in the side of the bank. We surrounded the pool with rocks so that the flow of water in and out was gentle and the river could not wash away our plants.

In a few days, I went down to the pool to see if the plant fibers had begun to loosen. There I found Ontwa, the Raven bathing in our pool. I greeted her and sat down on the bank to watch her bathe.

She asked why the plants were lying on the bottom of the pool as she was used to standing on gravel. I explained that we were we were soaking the plants so that we could remove the fibers. She asked what we wanted with them. And I told her that we made cord from the fibers and that the cord could be woven into nets for fishing. As she was not interested in fishing, she asked what else they were used for. I told her that we also made mats for preparing food and for carrying it wrapped into bundles. She wondered if it would be good for building a nest. And I told her that I thought it probably would be good. I told her that if she wished some of the fibers to



return later after we had separated them from the stalks and I would give her some for her nest.

I told her of my plans for making my rattles and how I planned to use some of the cords to tie them to my antlers. She asked me what rattles were. I picked up some gravel from the floor of the pool and shook some of the small stones together in my hand so that she could hear the sound the rattles would make. She laughed and said that it sounded like the cry of a young raven. We both laughed and she asked if I would make her a small rattle to entertain her children with. I agreed and said that by the end of summer, I would have one for her.

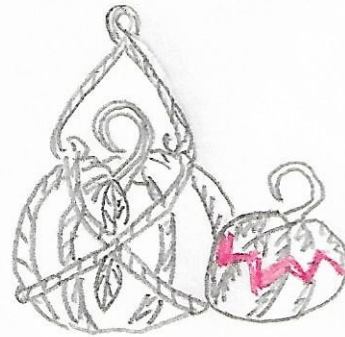


She thanked me and before she flew away, she plucked four small black feathers from her breast and gave them to me to adorn my rattles. She said that the sound of my rattles would remind me of this day and our talk.

Soon the gourds were ripe. I cut three of them and wound their stems into small loops. I lay them on a stone shelf to dry in the sun. At evening, I gathered them and placed them near the fire, carefully turning them to dry the damp sides. After some days, the skins were hard and the centers had begun to dry. I could hear the seeds being loosed from their membranes. I spun a string from the

cord plant fiber and wrapped two of the gourds inserting two of Ontwa's feathers into the bindings of each gourd. I tied more of the cord to the loops of stem to hang them from my antlers.

The third gourd was the smallest. I made sure that the loop of stem was large enough so that Ontwa could easily carry it in her claws. I went down to the marshes and gathered some of the red mud that lay in one part. I used it to paint a design on the gourd to delight her children.



I spun another short string and wound it around a bunch of the cord plant fibers so that it would be easy for her to carry.

I visited the pool where she bathed and waited for her. When she came, I gave her my gifts. She was pleased that I remembered her desires. She said we should continue to visit and let our friendship grow. The ravens could help our people with their far sight.

I showed her my rattles and she asked why I hung them from my antlers. I explained that they would be used for journeying. I

would shake them and their sound would change the world so that I might be able to find my path.

“Where do you go on this path?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Hungo gave me the knowledge before he left but I have not yet used it. I have been making the preparations.”

“Could I travel with you?”

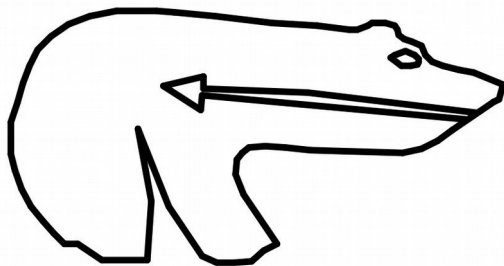
“I would think so. Of course, you are welcome to go with me.”

“When will we go?”

“I still have some more things I must do first. I will let you know when I am ready.”

She would visit me often during the summer and we would use my rattles to change the world. We journeyed often, finding lands and peoples not of this world.

When I walk I find my footprints in the dirt. When I fly with Ontwa, I am the whisper upon the wind.



Later that summer I met Mutu, a great dark bear.

When we walked through the grasslands, Chi-Chi-Pi called out. I

did not think we were trespassing. Mutu said, "He is just being cautious. He is a small person and doesn't know you and your ways." I nodded in agreement, and greeted him as we walked on. I promised him that our people will not harm him and his tribe. Chi-Chi-Pi chirruped that all was well and in return for my promise he said that his tribe would warn us if there was danger near. I thanked him.

I could sense the days growing shorter and the skies grayer as the sun traveled lower. Summer would soon pass. Mutu and I walked along the edge of the river. I wanted his advice. Our people had begun to argue. The summer had been good and food was plentiful. Some of our people wanted to stay in these new lands and not make the journey to the winter lands. We had found warm dry caves to live in and had dried gains and gourds and meat for many days. There would be enough to feed us through the winter.

Also, we had begun to have more things. We had woven many mats and nets. We had filled some of the mats with the seed tufts of the cloud trees and found these good for sleeping on. We had animal skins to wear. And, had even made cooking basins shaped from the soft earth from the marshes and hardened in our fire. All of these things would make our journey slower, but we did not want to part with them as they made our daily life easier.

The others thought this desire to stay foolish. We had always traveled with the seasons following the game on their migrations. If we were to stay anywhere, we should stay in the winter lands. I knew this could not be. The winter lands were too hot and dry when summer touched them. That is why we follow the game.

The people were divided and I knew some would stay and some would go. But, I could not do both. I would have to stay or travel. Who would care for those that I would have to abandon?

As we walked, we came to a dry creek bed that had once fed into the river. Mutu stopped and stared at the parched ground, his thoughts in the dream world. "What do you see?"



He looked into my eyes. "Your footprints in the snow."

I then knew what my choice would be. But, who would lead the people on their journey to the winter lands? I did not yet have an apprentice.

Mutu would ask for one of Konote's children to lead our people.

A few days later, Konote came to speak with me. He brought with him a young strong wolf, his eldest son, the most learned of Hungo's students.

I had meant to ask about Hungo. But, before I could, Konote took a small pouch from around his neck and handed it to me. It was softly woven from marsh reeds and hung from a cord of the same. I opened it and three small stones fell into the palm of my hand. They felt warm and glowed as if lit by moonlight. I smiled knowing that he was safe.

Later, Mutu and I returned to the dry creek bed. He said, "One day we will follow that creek bed to its old source. There, you may find new wisdom." I wondered what he meant.

He turned back to face the river. "Will you explore those distant lands?"

"Will they be good for our people?"

"When you become many, this valley will be too small."

"How will we cross the river? It is deep and fast."

"I will swim and carry you on my back."

"And the rest of our people?"

"There are other tribes, friends, who are also strong swimmers. They will help. But, I feel that some of your people will want to remain on this shore and not want to travel with those who return to

your winter lands with Konote's son. You will have to find someone who will look after their needs."

"When will this be?"

"When I am told it is time."

I returned to the valley and addressed our people. I told them of my talk with Mutu and that I would be crossing the river. I asked those that would want accompany me and those that would want to stay in the valley. Of those that would want to remain, would there be one who would want to learn the skills of the caretaker. I then left them to discuss these matters.

Sometime later Mutu came to visit again. "I feel it is time to follow the creek bed. You have found someone to learn your knowledge, and he is learning quickly." We started our journey. The creek bed wandered up through the low hills and into the forest.

As we traveled, we sometimes found small marshes fed by springs. But there was not more water than would satisfy the need of the nearby plants. Their water would not fill the creek bed. At the top of a high distant hill we found the spring that fed the creek. Stones now blocked its old path. And rain had dug a different path. Now the creek flowed down the far side. In the distance we could see that the new creek fed into the same river.

Mutu looked at me. "What do you know from this?"

I thought for a while. "Change, but the result is the same."

He looked at the ground. "More?"

"We go where our path is. Sometimes we follow our will, sometimes, the will of other's. But we will always follow our path."

Mutu looked at me and said, "You have learned well on your journeys. Ontwa has told me."

"She has? What does she say?"

"You have learned to judge less what is beyond your experience."

Sighing, I looked at him, "There is so much more to learn."

"Yes, and you will. It is time for you to cross the river."

"By journey?"

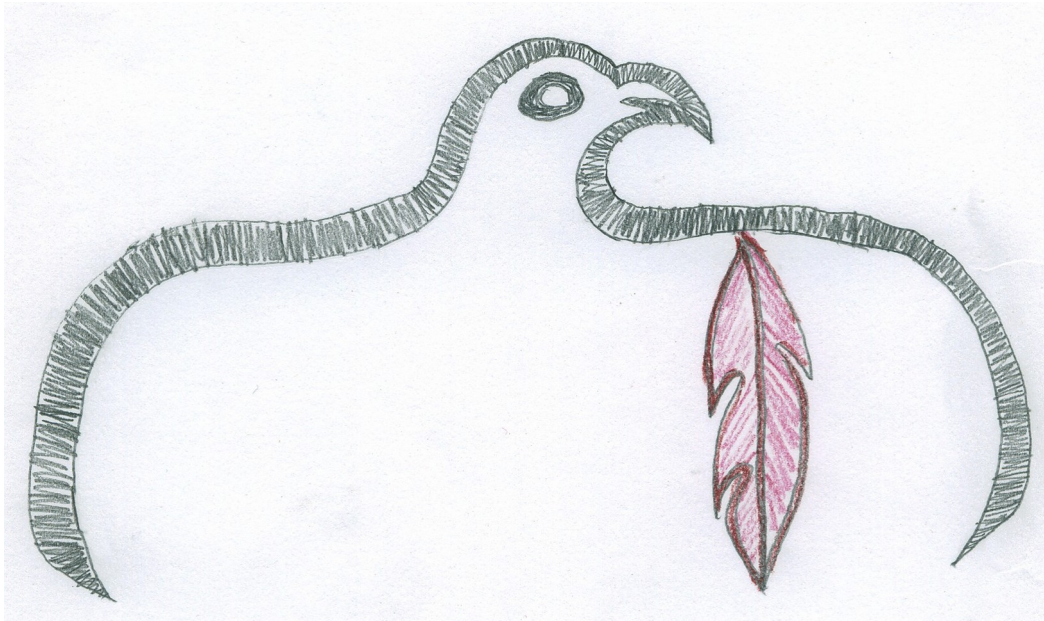
"No. This time you cannot fly. Your feet must touch this new land with proper respect."

"When?"

"Soon. Very soon."

I thought a while. "If I am to meet this new land, how do I address him?"

"He is called, Rus."



I am Red Feather Crow and this is the beginning of my journey. I will keep one red feather to remind me that I am human.



written and illustrated

– Mikel Hurtig (and in some other incarnations, Sharon Hurtle-Durand), an obscure writer of Russian-Finnish descent, whose favorite pastime is riding reindeer over the tundra

“Footprints in the Snow” photo by
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