

The Ten Oh Two Selected Work

Caitlin Scarano and Megan Perra

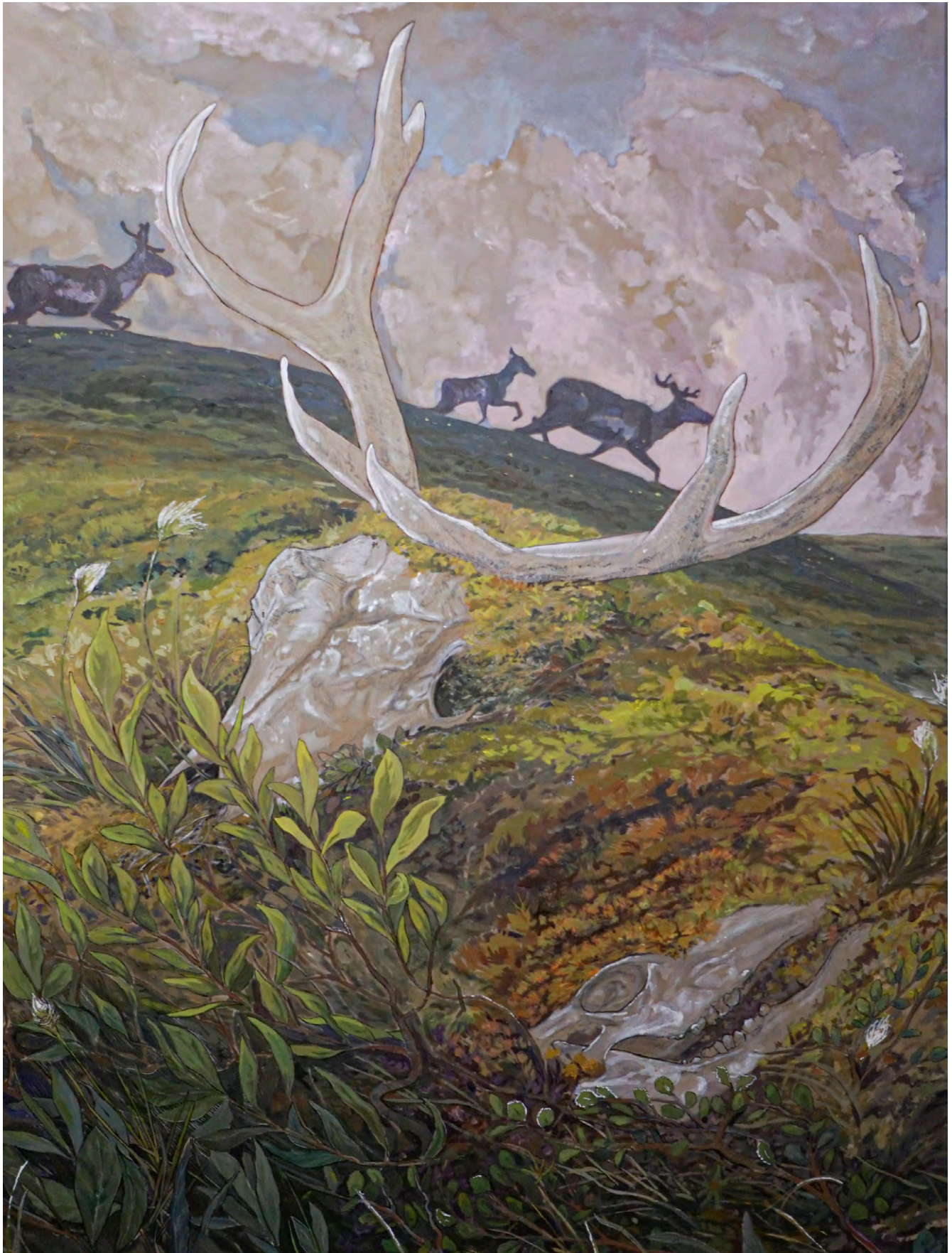
These three visual pieces (“Each Spine,” “Food in the Footsteps of Family” and “Let the Leaders Pass”) and their corresponding poems are a selection from a collaborative exhibit, “The Ten-Oh-Two,” between Megan Perra (visual artist) and Caitlin Scarano (poet). The exhibit, originally shown in the Bear Gallery in Fairbanks, Alaska in 2021, details a year in the migration of the Porcupine Caribou Herd (PCH) and the herd’s intersections with human and other non-human animals through a series of narrative poems paired with visual art. Each pairing represents a different, intersecting aspect of the PCH’s ecology.

The “Each Spine” pairing explores how history accumulates on a landscape, specifically how the shed female caribou antlers found in the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge chronicle the history and significance of this region as a calving ground for the herd going back thousands of years.

The “Food in the Footsteps of Family” pairing demonstrates the bond between mother caribou and calf, a relationship of following that imitates the dynamic of the larger herd. While the herd forages where the snow is shallowest, the calf forages in the footsteps of its mother.

The “Let the Leaders Pass” pairing represents the connections between Gwich’in history and culture and the Porcupine Caribou Herd. The title is a reference to Indigenous hunting traditions in Inuit and Gwich’in communities where hunters allow lead caribou to pass before they begin harvesting animals. These traditions informed the “Let the Leaders Pass” hunting policy, which was implemented in the Yukon from 2000-2007 along the Dempster Highway. The pairing reflects the complexities of knowledge in this system, and the desire to live sustainably within it.

* If you'd like to learn more about our collaborative process, please view our ondemand webinar, “Imagining the Porcupine Caribou Herd: A Dialogue between Wildlife Research, Art, and Poetry,” available online at <https://www.caitlinscarano.com/caribou-webinar>



EACH SPINE

"And sometimes too around there's some old antlers sticking out of the ground. When they look like they're sticking into the ground, they told us especially not to bother them. Whenever we bother old antlers, I believe it rains a lot because of it."

-Told by Kenneth Frank, Fairbanks, August 7, 2014 (1)

"The antiquity (1,629 and 3,157 cal years BP) of the shed female caribou antlers recovered from the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge, paired with the geography of the PCH calving grounds today[...]indicates that caribou calves have been born in this region across at least several millennia." (2)

Morning full of bog stars. The tundra in her crown.
Each shed marks a birth. Each spine a death.
So tell me, what do you want to keep?
I walked here once, lived this latticework of bones.

Each shed marks a birth. Each spine a death.
I was a child—sickly, hunted. I had a mother.
I walked here once, lived this latticework of bones.
Fear that made a mammal out of me.

I was a child—sickly, hunted. I had a mother.
Death assemblages—female antlers and neonatal spines.
Fear that made a mammal out of me.
Layers of bones, ladder of bones to the center of the earth.

Death assemblages—female antlers and neonatal spines.
Accumulations of mourning.
Layers of bones, ladder of bones to the center of the earth.
Only some of us survived that year.

Accumulations of mourning.
Whole octaves of autumn light. The tundra turns red.
Only some of us survived that year.
Birds migrate south, songs of neither shame nor redemption.

Whole octaves of autumn light. The tundra turns red.
Morning full of bog stars. The tundra in her crown.
Birds migrate south, songs of neither shame nor redemption.
So tell me, what do you want to keep?



FOOD IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF FAMILY

"Caribou select areas of relatively shallow snow for winter feeding, and do so on at least two levels: broad area and microsite [...] in areas of relatively shallow hard-packed snow, which is easily fractured into slab-like pieces, they can obtain access to vegetation with less expenditure of energy. [...] At all levels, selection seems to operate toward progressively shallower snow depths." (7)

Winter cracks from the chrysalis of autumn.
The earth will ask a question. The sky
will answer in snow.

A calf follows a path he was created for.
Born in late May, sheltered
by coastal plains. Bears, wolves, and golden

eagles eyed the watched-over calves.
Predators swamped with options.
Bonds blossom in calving grounds. He grew thick

on fat-rich milk. Protein hummed
through his body. Everything energized.
Winds off the Beaufort Sea shielded him

from the mind-numbing buzz
of mosquitos. Then, bots and warbles.
The dizziness of the herd's dispersal.

By fall, the whole world is movement.
He swims in single file lines across torpefying
rivers. Makes for wintering

grounds. Marches through the chaos
of rut. Seething scents, sounds
of aggression and arousal, his future.

But all that can wait.

His mother hoofs through snow
for bits of lichen, symbiosis
of fungi and algae. Gentle, her mouth
on the strands.

By now, he knows to mimic the gesture.



LET THE LEADERS PASS

A burning haibun, a form by torrin a. greathouse

"The Gwich'in and the Porcupine Caribou Herd have had a spiritual and cultural connection since time immemorial. Our identity is non-negotiable, we will never sell our culture and our traditional lifestyle for any amount of money." -Bernadette Demientieff, Executive Director of Gwich'in Steering Committee

Early autumn. The river will soon curl into ice. The light changes the angles of everything. When the first caribou come, the people let them pass. A procession of antlers across the fall-stunned tundra. Smell of rotting cranberry and wildfire on the wind. Termination dust on the hills. To survive is not noble, it is simply the work of living. Consonance of muscles, tendons, and ligaments. Powerlines tensed and untensed. Every micromovement across hundreds of boreal and permafrost-soft miles through winter in a warming world. Swathed by distance, the human imagination boils and blossoms. Can we live in a way that lets the landscape reveal itself? Can we live in a way that encourages what we value to return? Snow, knowledge, years— it all accumulates. The caribou graze and gather in the muskeg forests. If you could see it from above, the earth marked by trench lines, deep trails like scars through this drainage, the next drainage, and on and on. If you could see it all from above, you'd know they will cross every winter-haunted river in your mind, even if they cannot touch the bottom.

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Originally from Southside Virginia, **Caitlin Scarano** is a writer based in Bellingham, Washington. She holds a PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and an MFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her second full length collection of poems, *The Necessity of Wildfire*, was selected by Ada Limón as the winner of the Wren Poetry Prize and recently won a 2023 Pacific Northwest Book Award. You can find her at caitlinscarano.com

Megan Perra is a wildlife biologist and visual artist originally from Portland, OR. She has an MSc in Wildlife Biology from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and a graduate diploma in Visual Journalism from Concordia University in Montreal. She is currently pursuing her PhD studying caribou movement ecology at the State University of New York - College of Environmental Science and Forestry. You can find her online at [@feral5creativeco](https://twitter.com/feral5creativeco).