

Rebecca Huntman

Egret Painting Bison

At Altamira, Spain, fourteen-thousand-year-old bison pace the cave ceiling. The man below doesn't see them. He is looking down, scanning the cave floor for small pieces of decorated bone and antler like the ones he's seen at the Paris Exhibit of Stone Age Art. Perhaps if the archaeologists he'd met there had been talking about bison he would have known to look for them, too. But it is 1879. No cave art on this scale has yet been found.

It is not the man but the eight-year-old daughter playing at his side who thinks to look up. The child who sees what no modern adult has thought to look for: bison etched in charcoal and iron, chalk and clay; bison in motion and at rest, the hind leg of one animal emerging from stalagmite, another disappearing behind it, each figure overlapping the next.

The scientific community will dismiss these images as forgeries; they are too precise, the polychrome paint too splendid to be believed. Only after the man's death will they be deemed artifact and finally art. Their interpretation will continue to be contested—claimed by some to be the historical recording of actual hunting events, by others to be the painting of pagan pictographs imbued with the power to conjure newly imagined hunts, by others a sacred prayer. This is the trick of perspective. One movement of light causes an image to appear, another to disappear.

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There are at least two ways to tell this story. The simplest, most rational perspective suggests that Rick and I simply picked each other from an online dating catalog: *48 year-old dwf and 54-year-old dwm seeking one another within 50 miles of Columbus, Ohio*. But I'd like to risk a more fantastic perspective, one that begins 25,000 years before. A view sketched by ancient artists who reached hands and breath through rock toward whatever mysteries they believed lay on the other side. A view that moves us still to paint our world in image and symbol: A couple plucked from the Internet meeting in a coffee shop, sitting on a park bench, riding a motorcycle through the rain, her fingers laced around his waist. Both of them opening to the landscape that rushes by, their everyday lives left like specks on the map of the world sixty miles behind them that is Columbus. It is hard to imagine they ever attach themselves to such small things.

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Or I might choose to start the story here, three months before we met. I'm sitting with three friends in a living room filled with sunlight on a Sunday July afternoon. We are writers, prone to see the world in metaphor. The wine we are drinking helps. After a glass or two my friend Thao can just look at a person and tell what animal best captures their personality.

She is a rabbit, her husband a bear, our friend Molly a slow loris. And I, she announces, am an egret.

The only reference I have is the great egret of the Audubon Society's logo—a white, long-legged heron with an S-shaped neck and lacy plumes that cascade down its back. I like this idea of myself as fancy-feathered. A former Latin ballroom dancer, I am attracted to the showy and the shiny—the rhinestone-studded shoe, the feather-fringed jacket. Anything to set me apart from the crowd. Like the egret, I am most comfortable being admired from a distance.

For the last thirty years I'd kept myself out of reach—moving from St. Louis to Chicago to Columbus. Leaving behind three houses, two marriages, at least three careers, a son I raised alone. Lovers I chose as much for their inability to commit as their good looks and charm. I flew circles around these men but never allowed myself to land. I understood my odds. There were more single women than men. Even if

one found a mate, the divorce rate for second marriages was higher than for the first.

But the man I yearned for was a feeling, not a statistic. A guy who might have my back. A guy whose back I might also want to have.

“You need a bison,” my friends tell me. Someone steady to balance my flight.

The next morning I begin trying on the idea of partnership. I draw bison in pencil, in charcoal, in crayon. The part of me that won’t tell anyone about these drawings feels silly, irrational, tragically hopeful. But the part of me that believes in cave paintings, in the power of manifesting dreams through image and symbol, imagines the steady feel of bison under my feet. I draw a bison carrying an egret on its back,

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her feathers transforming into the white tutu of a ballerina dancing *en pointe*, spreading her wings. This last image comforts as much as it troubles me. I worry the landed bird might not dare relinquish her showy feathers, stop circling the field of all choices and surrender to this one. Even worse, I worry the field of all choices might reside only in imagination.

A few weeks later Rick responds to my online profile. He’s always admired creative people, he writes. “Leaving your ‘mark’ for people to enjoy long after you’re gone is a very appealing thought.”

“I like what you said about art,” I write back. “It seems like a good place to start a conversation.”

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In Columbus, Ohio, a new cave painting draws itself from the dusk: two silhouettes, a man and woman sitting on a bench in Schiller Park, backlit by the setting sun. They are just beginning to tell their stories, their words filling in the gaps between them the way they do when two people start inhabiting the same space. He has a game. Five questions: *Coffee or tea? Beatles or Stones? Cake or pie? Morning or night? Cats or dogs?* His own Meyers-Briggs. He is a man who likes his bands and beverages strong, his desserts dense, his animals without airs. His best friend is a

Jack Russell Terrier named Skip. It says so right on his profile. What it doesn’t say is that each day during his lunch hour he drives eight miles to his house so that Skip won’t have to be alone all day. Unlike many of the men she has known, this is a man who will call when he says he will call, show up when he says he will show up. A man whose actions will match his words, whose layers will add up to the same solid stuff he exhibits through his tastes in music and dessert.

“I have a game, too,” she offers, and tells him about a friend’s animal game.

He shakes his head. “A coworker brought a book to the office and told us what animals we were. I got the worst one.”

“The worst!” he repeats.

“My coworker told me I was a bison.”

Now she is the one shaking her head. She’d expected her bison-man to come in a rougher-looking package, perhaps more like the charcoal renderings she’s tucked in her dresser drawer. But this man is easy to look at: six-foot, two with hair that is both brown and gray, a face that is both crooked and perfect, shoulders that are both strong and boyish, not yet beaten down. A man who is a boy who is a bison.

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The cave artists painted unlikely images: Bison with horses. Bison with rhinoceros. Bison with bird. At Lascaux, France, they painted a man with bird’s head and hands next to a bison, the two floating in spiritual space.

When King Alfonso XII visited the cave paintings at Altamira, he dismissed the symbols and handprints he found as an ancient “Joe was here” and carved his own name alongside them. His actions seem

foolish to us now. Modern art makes distinctions between art and graffiti. But Alfonso's entourage was not worried about these categories; they privileged the idea of leaving their mark to record their presence among these walls. And it is with this idea of leaving records in mind that early anthropologists read cave painters' intentions as a simple logging of events complete with the animals and persons who figured prominently in them.

Later, researchers would suggest a less literal interpretation, the symbols not mere recordings but signs of sympathetic magic. A sort of spiritual wish list where artist-shamans painted images to communicate what they wanted to the spirits that resided on the other side of cave walls. The act of painting bison and deer ensuring that these same animals might manifest in the material world to satisfy their hunting needs in the midst of an Ice Age. An anchoring of reality through image.

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There are no cave paintings at Ohio's Old Man's Cave, only etchings—initials of lovers who've left traces of their story in its rock. The pair might have missed the carvings entirely if the light hadn't hit them at the exact moment they walked by. They are lost in a fog of infatuation that has everything and nothing to do with the perfect July day: the way the sunlight filtering through ancient hemlock and magnolia plays hide and seek across the names of lovers who've passed this way before them. The strata of time that add up to this sense of timelessness. The way these two root themselves within it, their fingers laced as they pose for a photograph.

She thinks about carving their own initials here, wonders how long their mark might outlast the ravages of wind and rain, the efforts of new artists who might leave their names after them. "Let's do it," she wants to say. But she is either too mature or cautious to deface state park property, her optimism tempered by ghosts who whisper through the layers of decades: *You were never good at love*, her first husband reminds her. And the second: *Who do you think you are?*

The man at her side has two tattoos on the inside of his right wrist—guiding symbols he's drilled into his flesh, their ink anchoring his deepest wishes. She has never had the desire or courage to commit to needle and ink, pin herself to one symbol. Given all she knows, how is it possible that the image she would choose today is the same she would still want on her person thirty years from now?

"Surely there's some part of you that doesn't change," he tells her. She doesn't tell him he's with someone who has no idea what that unchanging, grounded part of herself looks like. An artist whose imagery and media are constantly seeking new ways of knowing the world. Arranging and rearranging themselves on the stage, the canvas, the page. How she longs, even as she seeks rearrangement, to attach to fixed points, feel the ground beneath her feet.

How at the same time she fears she will be trapped—here, there, anywhere and therefore miles away from all the places she *might* be. Such a narrowing of choices to pick this one dot in the middle of Ohio in the middle of the country in the middle of the world.

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The bison at Altamira have no ground line or background but float in timeless, limitless space. Faces both human and animal hover on the surface of rock, as if coming to life from behind walls. These magical, floating images suggest the cave may not have been just a place to catalog stone age wishes but a portal, a permeable membrane into an underworld where spirits and spirit animals, referenced only by contours and partial shapes on the wall itself, awaited. Cave painters punctured this membrane by tracing their fingertips through wet mud, painting their palms with blood and pigment, pressing them into walls. They painted birds and horses and bison and deer, these images perhaps granting them access not just to the literal and symbolic incarnation of these animals but also to their spiritual energy and power. Deep in trance, cave painter-shamans transformed into therianthropes: humans with head and hooves of bison, humans with head and hands of bird. Their transformations granting them power to mediate between the worlds of spirit and the everyday—to heal the sick, to manifest the successful hunt.

Modern psychology wants to dismiss such visions as neurological phenomena brought on by sustained

trance states. Hours of extended dance and prayer, fasting and psychotropic drugs causing the mind to produce a progression of predictable, neurologically-fired images: geometric dots, grids, zigzags, meandering lines giving way to hallucinatory images where pairs of species that do not consort in real life only *appear* real. Where bison and bird only *appear* to be a pair.

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Four weeks after I start dating Rick, a Google search returns photos of egrets riding bison. Their partnership is not limited to cave walls. It is a real thing. But the egret I find pictured is not the statuesque great egret of my imagination; it is smaller, stockier, with a hunched posture and a sturdy bill. The heron known as the cattle egret is thick-necked and hardy. It is not fancy feathered. Nor does it ride alone.

The cattle egret follows bison and other herd animals, hopping onto their backs to catch the insects they stir up. And while their relationship may not be fancy, it is practical. The cattle egret is almost four times more successful when foraging near a bison than when alone. In return, it relieves its ride of ticks and other parasites.

This more grounded version of partnership feels like both a relief and a death. To think I might not be a great egret soaring through the air but a cattle egret riding close to the earth, picking bugs off my hairy ride.

I wonder what it might look like for me, the showy, high-flying great egret, to give way to the earthier cattle egret, adjust the details of how the dream will come to life and settle into the spirit of the thing. Might one image draw itself over the other without losing the other entirely?

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She had hoped to be the cool, carefree girl on the back of the motorcycle. But she is in her head, wondering if the black tank and jeans she settled on are right for this day trip to Yellow Springs, worrying about deadlines that keep her connected to Columbus. About gravity that might or might not keep her connected to the ground. About the gathering clouds that threaten whatever stability she might imagine.

From her view behind him he is all shoulders and hands. She'd noticed them the first day they'd met. The leather cuff and tattoos on his right wrist suggesting these hands belonged to a man more layered than his blue button-down shirt let on. More than the hands of a white-collar public servant, these were the hands of a father. An athlete. A musician. A shaman.

He might think she is being hyperbolic. Strumming along to Tom Petty in the basement makes him as much of a musician as belonging to the softball league that gathers by his house each summer makes him an athlete. And shaman? Even the word is not part of his vocabulary.

Still, she'd felt his magic the first time he'd reached over the front seat of his car to place his right hand, the tattooed one, on her knee. "Isn't it strange to think how separate we are in our bodies?" he'd asked. "Each of us going about our own lives, a separate unit encased in our own skin?"

She'd felt the electricity from his palm penetrate the surface of her skin and wondered if separation might be an illusion. "What if we're more connected than we think?" she'd asked. But talking about connection is easy in the beginning when one is connecting only to the idea of connecting. Harder to connect to the person, who is more of a shifting object than the idea of them ever was. How to trust something so porous and therefore unreliable. How to trust that, once the dots are connected, they will hold you in place.

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As a child, I knew myself as the center of all things. An artist-mineralogist-archeologist-magician-astronomer. On summer nights I'd step outside the suburban nineteen-sixties home my father had laid across Midwestern prairie and stretch across its back lawn. When I shut my eyes, the chirping of crickets and tree frogs re-drew themselves on the insides of my eyelids: gray dots swirling into orange and red. When I opened them, the dots continued to dance, filling the air as far as I could see. I saw atoms, I thought,

heavy with the knowledge that I had tapped into an invisible force adults needed a microscope to see.

It was that same mix of the scientific and the mystical that brought me to the arrangement of stone. I collected bits of volcano and ocean inside the glass-doored cabinet I kept in my bedroom, typed their scientific and common names onto slips of paper, showed them off to guests I hijacked from my parents' dinner parties. The notion that these specimens represented more than just their labels kept me coming back to them: the idea that million-year-old fish might still swim in layers of sedimentary stone. That tiny but ancient brachiopods and cephalopods slumbered in the limestone under my feet as I climbed the creek that ran just a half-mile from my house. The strata of the Earth opened before me and they were teeming with layers of memory and possibility.

Perhaps this belief in the invisible appears childish to the adult world. But the child, like the cave painter, has her own logic: A logic that privileges feeling over thought, curiosity over proof. A logic that wants to risk looking foolish—like writing a love story about an egret and a bison. The great egret is a loner, circling the waters for prey, the bison a herd animal of the pastures. How would they ever meet except in story?

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The August day flutters between sunshine and clouds, at first flirting, then threatening to storm. The pair still has time to get lunch in Yellow Springs, to wander the white tents of an art fair where he will buy a pair of silver and tiger-eye earrings, a first gift. Bit by bit the sky will become more ominous until neither of them can hope to escape its blackening. They ride through the worst storm he has ever ridden. He understands the dangers of the slick road and sliding rain, narrows his thoughts to the road beneath them. She, too, feels terror. But she does not know anything about riding motorcycles, how to steer through sun or rain. She abandons thought and presses into him, holds tight to the one thing that holds them both to the ground.

Weeks after the trip to Yellow Springs, they will have their first fight and it will be more terrifying than any storm. He will be tired and want to watch television and play with the dog. She will try connecting these dots into a narrative, a story with a shape she can recognize. His lack of attention means he has lost interest. And why not? They are so different. He is Tom Petty and she is Celia Cruz. They are ground and air. Certainty and flight. He is staid, born and bred in Ohio; he might never leave. She is a wanderer; she might never stay.

But she is ahead of herself. The outcome of their story is still an open question, as unknowable as the cave paintings themselves.

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Two hundred years ago Shawnee claimed this Ohio landscape. They say their ghosts are still here, whispering among eastern hemlock and Canadian yew as old as the Ice Age. Like medieval clergymen who wrote new texts over pagan parchment, the human and natural fold into new versions of themselves—farmers raising barns and fences, adding new layers to the palimpsest that scratches its own story over but never quite erases what has come before.

At Altamira fourteen-thousand-year-old bison still move across cave ceilings. We know almost nothing about the artists who painted them. Their intentions fade into the gaps of mold and time, their creations outpacing the reach of our imaginations.

And yet we like to imagine. In fourteen thousand years, what trace of this story might remain? Perhaps a drawing of a bison and egret folded in a dresser drawer waits to be discovered. An ancient trail of emails between two lovers of art circles through space waiting to be deciphered.

Perhaps a man and child walk this very road to Yellow Springs. He is looking down, scanning for treasure, when something catches the girl's attention: a tremor in the wind, the faint smell of motorcycle exhaust on an otherwise empty road, a dust cloud shaped like two strange animals. The exact contours will be lost, their story legible only in the gaps: how a middle-aged man and woman rode by on a warm

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August afternoon. Not the cynical sorts so common in the twenty-first century but more childish sorts, true miracle devotees. Two cave painters, one with head and hands of bird, the other a bison, strong and steady.

They are still on the motorcycle. His hands, leather-gloved, squeezing the throttle as Route 40 gives way to 42, the dot behind them that is Columbus opening to a blur of new reference points: old filling stations and drugstores. Barns and cornfields and white picket fences with black and white dogs barking behind black iron gates.

She closes her eyes and the landscape disappears along with the highway beneath them. The woman in her head also disappears. All thoughts replaced by gray dots that dance on the screen of her eyelids, morph into zigzagging lines that meander into solid forms. A single white feather becomes a cascade of plumage, the suggestion of a mouth a beak. She is an egret. Long-necked and fancy-feathered, spreading her wings yet supported, the hum of motorcycle and wings blurring into one rhythm.