

## Tomskaya Pisanitsa Park, Kemerovo

*Andy Croft*

*'we all matter, we are all indelible, miraculous, here'.  
(Julia Darling)*

*for Dasha*

1

We take a break from our discussions  
About the British poetry scene.  
About time too; I've bored these Russians  
Quite long enough now. In between  
Each post-New Gen New Generation  
And last week's latest new sensation,  
I have the sense they're not impressed.  
Oh dear. Although I tried my best,  
When every poet is 'dark' and 'daring',  
Each new collection 'vibrant', 'bold'  
And last year's new is this year's old,  
The sum effect is somewhat wearing.  
There's rather more to art, I fear,  
Than simply saying, *I was here*.

2

We take the bus across the river.  
Beneath the wide Kuznetsky Bridge  
They're fishing on the ice. We shiver.  
It would be warmer in a fridge.  
We're driving North, past roadside diners,  
The monument to Kuzbass miners,  
The forest blur of greys and browns,  
And summer-dacha shantytowns,  
Scalectrix roads and lego churches.  
The bus slows down. At last we're there.  
We stop among the silent glare  
And tinsel glitter of the birches  
(I borrowed this line from a verse  
By Mandelshtam – it could be worse).

3

Ten minutes later, we're stood gazing  
In frozen silence at these cliffs –  
A frieze of hundreds of amazing  
Six thousand year old petroglyphs  
That stretch from Dürer-like cross-hatches  
To etch-a-sketchish childish scratches.  
Abraded, nicked and tricked and picked,  
These scrawls upon the walls depict  
A pre-Deluvian procession  
Of aurochs, foxes, wolves and deer,  
A hunter with a pointy spear  
(Or bandy-stick). Sod self-expression –  
It seems to me all art starts from  
These pictograms beside the Tom.

4

The Sympathetic Magic thesis  
(See Abbé Breuil, of Lascaux fame)  
Proposed that it was through mimesis  
That we first taught ourselves to name  
And tame the growling world with patterns;  
That art expands the things it flattens;  
That humankind first found its tongue  
When rhythmic gesture, dance and song  
Marked out the grunter from the grunting;  
That knocking matter into shape's  
What separates us from the apes;  
And that the hunted started hunting  
When we began to imitate  
Creation's hunger on a plate.

5

Imagined goals are scored by winners –  
Once caught by art upon these rocks  
These animals were Sunday dinners,  
A winter coat, a pair of socks.  
No need to shiver by the river  
When art's enchantments can deliver  
A woolly vest to keep you warm.  
A pelt fits like a well-made form,  
A birthday suit (but less informal),  
A fur-lined cloak in which to hide  
And keep the hungry world outside,  
A second skin that feels, well, normal.  
In short, when we first borrowed fur,  
The human soup began to stir.

6

The world out there is strange and formless,  
A wilderness of blood and force –  
Art's job's to make it seem less gormless  
(From *gaumr*, 'lacking sense' – Old Norse).  
These primitive caricaturists  
Were never art-for-art's-sake purists;  
Their work was useful as an axe,  
Each rock-engraving made the facts  
Of Neolithic dreams still bigger.  
Above the bison, bears and birds  
The stick-men chasing reindeer herds,  
There seems to be a flying figure  
Among the stars and solar rings:  
A human with a pair of wings.

7

Cue Kubrik's famous match-cut edit  
As trumpets fanfare to the dawn:  
A handy tool with which to credit  
The narrative of brain and brawn  
(An always useful combination)  
That saw us conquer all creation  
And take our place among the stars.  
Leonov's weightless boots were *ours*.  
But you can't space-walk like a model  
Or take your partner in the waltz  
Unless you know which steps are false;  
Before a child can learn to toddle,  
As someone said, you need the knack  
Of sometimes taking one step back.

8

This Kemerovo conurbation  
Was built by US Reds with dreams;  
They came at Lenin's invitation  
To drain the coal-rich Kuzbass seams  
Which Kolchak's Whites had lately flooded,  
They stayed four years, and worked and studied  
Till Comrade One-Crutch learned to fly  
And Big Bill Heywood's good left eye  
Could see that they had half-created  
A Wobbly city in the sticks.  
But then in 1926,  
The colony was 'liquidated'  
And History wiped the record clean,  
Almost as if they'd never been.

9

Just like the old Siberian Yeti  
Whose hairy footprints in the snow  
Get journalists all hot and sweaty  
At forty-five degrees below;  
Though sightings are reported yearly  
The cynics say that they are merely  
A troupe of circus bruins who  
Escaped from some old Soviet zoo,  
Deciding that unspoken freedom  
Sounds better than the world's applause.  
The Park's bears, meanwhile, show their claws  
To Sunday visitors who feed 'em  
Their honeyed wages through the bars  
That separate their world from ours.

10

In Bear Rock cave a single finger  
Is all that's left of some lost race  
Who lacked, perhaps, the art to linger  
Before they vanished without trace;  
Perhaps they never learned to fashion  
The world to get their morning ration;  
Or else they lacked the wherewithal  
To read the writing on the wall  
That spelled out their abrupt extinction.  
These folk were here. And now they've gone.  
Like sabre-tooth and mastodon.  
The hungry world makes no distinction  
Between the beasts on which we prey  
And those to which we ought to pray.

11

But evidence of evolution's  
A kind of messy palimpsest –  
These rocks include some contributions  
By later artists (*Ya bil zdes*) –  
To wit, although we think we're brainier  
We can't shake off the graphomania  
We caught six thousand years ago  
(Like writers pissing in the snow).  
These bare rocks mark the clumsy stages  
By which we make our slow ascent;  
All art can do is represent  
Our progress on their uncut pages  
Before we each must disappear,  
By simply saying, *we were here*.

*Notes*

This sequence was written while teaching briefly at the University of Kemerovo, in Siberia, in 2010. The Tomskaya Pisanitsa Park is a few miles outside the city, famous for a series of Neolithic rock-carvings on the banks of the river Tom. Alexei Leonov, the first human to walk in space, was born in Kemerovo. *Comrade One-Crutch* is the title of the children's novel about Kemerovo by the US writer Ruth Epperson Kennell. Bear Rock Cave is south of Kemerovo in the Altai Krai, the site of the recent discovery of 'Woman X' or the 'Denisova Hominin'. This sequence was first published in *Kuzbass XXI Vek*, March 2011.