

Nancy Campbell

## One Bear – Two Seals – The Knife

‘It is through stories that we weave reality.’

– *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*

Night time. I am working late – as usual – while bats flicker along the sandstone wall that divides the terrace from the river. There are pedestals on the wall at intervals, topped with weathered sculptures of people in ancient dress. Sometimes, especially at dusk, I catch these ancestors out of the corner of my eye and I forget they are made of stone – the stillness of the regiment, their proximity to my windows, unnerves me. Their eyes gaze across the river, towards the houses on the opposite bank where a few windows are lit.

It has been raining heavily today, and the river has a briny smell. I can hear the water rushing over the weir – and a more reluctant stream of musical notes from the studio of my neighbour, a composer who disrupts the strings of grand pianos and violins with elastic bands and fishing reels. In quiet moments, I hear my fingers as they scuffle across the keypad. Slowly, these sounds I am making will become a text, as the composer’s will resolve into a score. I am thinking about the news this month – more than one million species are in danger says the latest report – nature is declining and extinction accelerating. The papers say it is a call to action, but not much action has been taken.

In some cultures, the names of the dead must not be spoken. How should I write, now? How to handle a noun once the object it refers to becomes extinct? Tenses turn from future to past, skipping the present. Prepositions grow obsolete. The page fills with nothing, or remains blank.

To wake my screen takes only a light and instinctive finger tap. That, at least, is speciously easy. But my laptop’s hardware is a

*One Bear – The Bear’s Den – An Elk – Two Little Elks Lying – The Dog – The Mink*

*Canoe – Two Men Fighting – Paddling Under Coppermaker – Wrinkled Face in the House – Unfolded*

– *The Mink’s House – A Small Owl – A Second Owl – Mallard Ducks – A*

mystery to me. Rare earth minerals have been mined for it – and buried deep within by a distant labour force. It requires endless electrical power. In the apartment on the other side of mine, a writer is working on a novel. We're all so nocturnal here. The irregular clatter of her typewriter keys on the carriage bursts through the wall, a background percussion. Would it be better to write on a typewriter? Or should I look back to even older technology? Not far away from here, downriver, is the city of Mainz where in the 15th century Johannes Gutenberg – variously described as a blacksmith, goldsmith, manufacturer of mirrors, and publisher – invented a means for mass-producing moveable metal type, and combined this with other ingenious devices to print his 42-line Bible in 1455. From then on, ways of telling stories in Europe were never the same. Books were produced faster, more uniformly and in major editions for dissemination to ever more readers. Reality began to be woven differently.

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These days, most publishers use digital methods of production, but there are still letterpress workshops engaged in hot-metal typesetting and hand printing. I've spent at least half my life working in them. I am not the only writer to fall for the striking visuals of letterpress, nor alone in admiring this technology for its more modest consumption of the Earth's resources. A decade ago, a pamphlet was published which urged storytellers and culturemakers to create alternatives to the fast, the uniform, the mainstream. The cover of *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto* was letterpress-printed by Christian Brett of Bracketpress in Lancashire. The 'uncivilised writing' which the manifesto called for took the form of the journal which you hold in your hands. This journal continues to be designed and typeset at Bracketpress, the physical form of these books as significant as the content. This writing is 'Human, inhuman, stoic and entirely natural. Humble, questioning, suspicious of the big idea and the easy answer.'

There is no easy answer. Different stories need to be told now, and new technologies must be found to tell them. For stories are data, and data is greedy. Data storage has also been in the news. By 2025, the internet will consume a fifth of the world's electricity. The act of storytelling is never neutral, and the materials used may be complicit. The alphabet abets the end.

As ever more studies suggest that the grand human narrative is reaching its denouement, the potential for reproducing narratives are astonishing. The seemingly limitless dimensions of the internet vie with the conventional codex – a form that is finite in both page length and in edition size. Yet this line of text I construct, letter by letter, still owes much to Gutenberg. Here, in his shadow, I begin to renounce it. I look for an alternative way to tell the story of species extinction. And the alternative I find is string.

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With a string, your hands could tie a knot, and this knot might look like many other things. With two hands and a knotted string you can make a circle or a square. For a thousand years or more, this circle or square was the screen on which string figures shifted, accompanied by chants or spoken stories.

The first string figure I encounter is that of the candle thief, a man who steals light from his neighbour. By coincidence, the candle thief is found in both Scotland, where I grew up, and Germany, where I am living now. When people travelled, as I have done, sharing ideas, trading stories, the string figures went with them, and now they are scattered around the world. This gallivanting candle thief would be a good familiar for one who writes at night. But the idea of darkness recalls the string traditions of other places I've lived – the Pacific Northwest and Greenland.

There are few studies of string figures; only hard-to-find volumes published in the last century. Diamond Jenness, who explored the Arctic around Coronation Gulf in Nunavut, published some findings in his *Report of the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913–18*. The

Soviet ethnologist Julia Averkieva travelled to Vancouver Island with her supervisor Franz Boas in 1930 to record the string figures of the Kwakwaka’wakw people. Averkieva’s notes, which remained unpublished through both her long and distinguished career as an ethnologist and during her time in a labour camp, were recovered, edited and published by Mark A. Sherman, as *Kwakiutl String Figures*.

Not more than three generations before, Georges Cuvier, working at the National Museum in Paris, had developed his theory of catastrophes; his paper *Mémoires sur les espèces d’éléphants vivants et fossils* (1800) made the case for extinction. Before this, the consensus of science was that no species could die out. Fossils of extinct species had been discovered – the remains might not have looked like known creatures, but either the forms were so crumpled and incomplete they could be roughly ascribed to existing animals, or it was assumed they represented living animals yet to be encountered by biologists. The concept of extinction had to be created in the human mind, and it was created not long ago. Cuvier was only as far in time from Averkieva, as Averkieva is from me.

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Some of the string figures Averkieva recorded represent animals; some showed everyday activities such as digging clams, or men fighting; others, objects of everyday use and natural phenomena: kelp, mountains, canoes, fire drills, spirits. Averkieva observed young men on Vancouver Island gathering in groups and spending their evenings ‘going from house to house, strings in hand, competing with each other and with their hosts in the facility with which they executed and varied the designs of their figures.’ The spiritual beliefs behind these games had faded, but the forms persisted as a test of skill and a method for memory training. The narratives might be violent or dream-like, the content familiar. The winner often blew his string in the face of his opponent, contemptuously bringing the contest to an end.

Jeness and Averkieva had a shared approach to transcription: their texts list the combination of finger and hand movements required – although the terms for each movement were argued over by different schools – followed by a line drawing of the finished figure. This breakdown was the best publishing could offer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the instructions are complex and hard to follow; the diagram is hard to read. I stare at the angular, almost abstract forms. The crossing threads are tangled around each other like dogs' traces after they have been running for miles. Like a fossil. Even if I follow the instructions, I am not sure my loop of string would look like this, or be recognisable as the object it represents.

Learning to read the string takes time. I struggle to see in these figures the skeleton of the objects they represent. Sometimes the visuals are ambiguous, even on completion. In these shapeshifting signs, a bear can be a man. Those triangles could be mountains, or the prow of a canoe. The eye is trained to see multiplicity. It is best to be coaxed along by a player who can explain the tale.

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Online I find a video of David 'Kिताq' Nicolai performing in Anchorage in 2010. He demonstrates one of the most difficult string figures, 'The Fox and the Whale'. While talking to the audience, his fingers scumble together a series of knots in seconds. Then he shakes his work out again. 'The thing about string figures, you always have to show up at the end with a clean loop.' The evidence disappears in a moment. A piece of string can be erased and reformed, over and over. When you pull it apart, it unravels so swiftly.

Sometimes the process of making is integral to the story – as in 'The Whale Floats up to the Surface of the Water' – but most often the focus is the shape in the hands at the end.

I begin to write about the figures but cast off these texts again before they are complete, shake them out like a loop of string. My process seems resistant, even in details: every time I type 'string' my

finger slips and it comes out as ‘strong’. I can’t touch type. I wonder about writing, about the point of writing, about all the hundreds of words I am trying to string together. The texts I am writing – if they were in string, how unwieldy they’d be.

String is inclusive. The figures might be made from plant fibres, a strand of yarn, a thong or sinew, a plait of hair. The sinister spirit of string figures – a warning to children – was said to pull out its own intestines to play with. Averkieva used a shoelace, you can see it in her photographs.

I close my laptop, light a candle and pick up a ball of string.

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How long is a piece of string? Surely a long one when you need to create a whale, a short one when you need to create a flea? But no, scale is equivocal, and the flea may be as big as, or bigger than, a whale. The string should always be as long as a whip. Many wear it looped around their neck before they begin to play.

There were rules. Jenness was told that string games should only be played in the dark, due to a legend ‘that the sun once beheld a man playing cat’s cradles and tickled him.’ Anyone who made figures before the sun had set might be accused of bringing bad weather. In Hudson Bay, others encountered different beliefs: ‘According to Captain Comer the natives of Iglulik play cat’s cradles in the fall when the sun is going south, to catch it in the meshes of the string and so prevent its disappearance.’ A powerful string would stop the season shifting.

A large circle, doubled, trebled so my hands are contained within the string. I poke the tip of my left index finger under a loop, hook it around another finger. Pause. My hands move together and apart – and then draw inwards again, making a series of symmetrical movements, one finger, then the next, like rowing – I become a web of human and string, tying myself to invisible ideas. The string is no longer a string – it becomes another thing in every maker’s mind.

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The knot travels around and along. The string tightens, and digs into the crook of my thumb. Gradually my hands pull closer. I have imprisoned myself in my own story. The figures are companionable, balanced, a mirror reflecting the work of two hands. The twisted patterns will be more or less the same among all players but the size and shape depend on the character of those hands – the thickness and angle of fingers.

Sometimes the figures are drawn from the string, sometimes from the spaces between. But the story always relies on these spaces. The fingers hold the string apart, outlining sections of air. The strings cross each other but the fingers never meet. Hands turn over, turn inside out, and then upend the arrangement, peeling it backwards. Discarded, it falls in tangles to the ground, in a new pattern. Unplanned, untethered. This is the game about nothing: to create something of nothing and make it disappear again. A knife of course, can cut a string – unless it is a knife of string.

String is a web for a land without spiders. The net you throw over something to catch it. A string is both circular and linear, the best way to tell a story with no beginning or ending. With no known ending or beginning. Looped around the wrists by night, by day it cuts a line across the snow – across the sea – a harbour wall – a harpoon line – a coastline – the limit of sea ice or water level. String will secure things – lash wood to wood or bone to bone. It stops things being stolen – stops ropes unravelling – stops containers opening of their own accord – plays its part in tethering creatures. It ties one thing and another, ties here to there. It dances around its own tension. With a good knot, it will never fray. It is what draws the flensed skin taut on the frame – always the middleman, between or around things. What was the last thing you used a string for?

The sun begins to rise. The hands are most dextrous, when they are tied.