

Of Settlement. Of Roots - Jane Burn

Much sea had passed beneath our dugout boats. Our gutted tree carried us far beyond. Mesolithic, I think you call us now. Once, we were wanderers, shore to shore.

Our feet had paddled many shallows. We had hauled our hollowed vessels onto unfamiliar sands. We were fisherfolk – had not yet stood so long as to settle stone upon stone, nor planted and waited for crops.

We were reapers of water not earth, yet this land seemed a good place to be. My feet sank in fine, pale grains – the wind took its adze through our salt-stained furs.

I clutched my pelts tight to my own skin and walked inland. Within me were urges to explore, discover, find. The ice had peeled from this place. It was sweetened with new grass.

The rest of my kin stayed on the beach – my brothers made statues in the water as they balanced harpoons, their fingers sure on the handles of fire-hardened wood. They were always so patient – had keened each point and edge to better win the hunt.

Sunlight blinked from their waiting flints – fish soon glinted from the ends. My mother readied woven baskets, gathered driftwood, cobbled a circle and started up blaze – I could hear the music of rocks as she struck two together for sparks.

Away from them, I felt afraid, adventurous, ready to strike out, ready for a life of my own. I palmed my pendant of scratched shale – had found such pleasure in making the lines. It was proof of my existence. I had wanted to render what I saw but only managed to make these few marks. I kept on trying – I needed a way to empty out the artist in my mind.

My lover came to where I stood. His nearness brought me warmth. In my belly there was a child, growing fast. I was starting to think of a home of our own. Being there put questions in my head – I was starting to think of structure, of settlement, of roots.

I sat and cracked a hazelnut, nibbled its sweetness, flicked away the shell. Here will be named Longhowe, though we did not know this then.

Notes: A charred hazelnut shell found in excavations at Longhowe, Orkney proved that Mesolithic people once made a settlement there.