

The Wild Aurochs, Now Extinct, is the Ancestor of Most Breeds of Domestic Cattle.

Watch out, the neighbours told us, they're wild; they're fierce. When you walk along the tracks, be noisy, sing, in case you corner a feral bull, or, worse, a feral cow with her calf.

Like a story told in the dark, to cheeky children or brash newcomers, to render them wide-eyed and quiet.

The signs of them were clear enough: the cowpats, the cropped grass, the deeply-pocked mud by the creek. But these were descendants of the clever ones, those who evaded muster when the farming folded, on land too dry, too steep, too far from markets. These remnants too, were clever, and wherever you looked, not there.

Sometimes, on a still night, the strangle-throated shriek of a cow, defying and breaking up sleep.

Each day, I had to walk from our back gate, along tracks through the gorse and manuka, to the road at the top of the ridge. One dark winter morning, the long grass near our gate was flattened, smoothed by large, nesting bodies. When I touched the grass, it was warm. I'd seen nothing, heard nothing.

As if just visiting. As if painted figures, hidden in caves for thousands of years, took flesh, came out to graze, breath salt air, blink at moonlight.

In the five years I lived there, I saw one just once. From the road, looking down to the bay, I watched a young male emerge from the scrub to eat grass near the water. The early light touched his horns and the hair along his back. His head jerked up and he held my gaze for a second before he returned to the kanuka shadows, and vanished.

But here, painted still on the dreaming walls of the mind

Not gone.

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