

Nun Cho Ga (Big Animal Baby)

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Abstract

In 2022, a woolly mammoth baby was discovered in Yukon Territory, on Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in land, by a young placer miner. Named **Nun cho ga**, which means “big animal baby” in the Hän language spoken by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, the baby is one of the best-preserved woolly mammoths ever discovered. She is around the same size as the Lyuba, who was discovered in Siberia in 2007.

Keywords

placer mining, permafrost, decolonial temporality, extraction

The human found you, shivering, probably, on June 21st, 2022. National Indigenous Day. Summer Solstice. You were unearthed from what is called the Eureka creek bed, south of Dawson City, Yukon, on Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Land, at a placer mining site. The human, a placer miner, young and green behind the ears, didn't mean to, but as he was digging away the dirt to wash out the gold, he cut you in half with the blade of his front-end loader.

When I heard this part of the story, I felt such wretched sorrow for you, but what do I know? My connections to this place (they feel strong to me) are tenuous at best. I am a settler and also green behind the ears. I lived only three summer seasons in Dawson City, on the land you were found. I worked various jobs, including as an artist, and for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in government.

No matter. A placer miner found you, and you were a great treasure. You'd been there for around 35,000 years. Probably before you went under, 35,000 years ago, you were eating grass near a beautiful creek bed. You didn't name the creek, but you probably loved it. Eating your favourite food (next to your mama's milk), you happily munched away. Your mama was probably close by, within earshot of your calls, I'm sure. But then, a sudden storm. A landslide! And despite your trying, slipping, gasping, wishing, the mud came down, down, down. My dear, at only 30 days old, you were buried. The mud took you, and you perished. Baby girl, baby mammoth. You passed from this world to the next. And, like some kind of magic, you stayed in this world too. A baby time-being trapped in that perfect collaboration of earth and frozen water: permafrost. It kept you. Kept you somehow embraced. Kept you somehow whole.

Placer miners in the Yukon use water to gouge away permafrost and cut down mountains, to get to the gold in the lower layers of gravel. It is gut-wrenching, seeing valleys become mud-lands. Seeing the guts of the valley wrenched free, the violence of destruction-extraction. This is the process by which you were unearthed too, little one. It isn't for me to judge the events that brought you (again) into this world. It is enough to say you were mined like gold, and golden you are. I will say this: as words, "extracted" and "unearthed" feel too unholy to carry on using in the case of you. They aren't the right words for this sacredness. What you were was rebirthed. Unknowingly for the most part, but with not unkind intentions. You were rebirthed, Nun Cho Ga.

As a mother, I use the word rebirth in all its fullness. The gushing of water, the pushing and pounding against the inner valley wall, the ripping and pulling of you out from your comfort, your resting place, the uncanny horror at the alien discovery: a small slippery wet body made from earth—and yet much more than earth—suddenly in someone's hands. The making of responsibility, the bursting-forth of surprise, then love.

In the hours after your rebirth, the sky exploded with thunder, with lightning, with rain. With a storm that took everyone's breath away. The hapless midwives (miners and geologists mostly) had to slip and scramble through the liquified permafrost to get you to safety. From front end loader bucket to truck, from truck to freezer. From frozen darkness to wet light, from wet light back to frozen darkness. Because air is your enemy now, Nun Cho Ga. You've been in darkness and cold, it is your safe place, and they knew this. How bright it must've been for you, emerging after tens of thousands of years right into the height of the midnight sun, the longest day of the year! How you must've called that storm to mark your coming. Told the sky to darken for you, that it was too bright, too bright.

The elders know how to honour you, Nun Cho Ga. They know how to care for you. As soon as they heard, they gathered and sang for you, thanking you for coming. I for one am marveling at you, time traveler, being from the cold cold past, landing in the warm warm present, and guiding us into our precarious and hot hot future.

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Conflicts of Interest

The research was conducted in the absence of any conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Shelley O'Brien is a multidisciplinary artist, singer-songwriter, and researcher whose work explores themes of time, memory, and ecology through an arts-based and often post-human lens. With a PhD in environmental studies, Shelley has held various roles, including Education Coordinator at the University of Toronto Centre for the Study of Pain. As a settler with lived experience in Dawson City, Shelley brings a tender perspective to the discovery of Nun cho ga, a young woolly mammoth, engaging questions of extraction, preservation, and temporality. Through both writing and music, Shelley bridges creative expression and environmental consciousness, offering poetic insight into our shared histories and futures.