

To the Edge of the world

*The edge of the world is where we are bound,
with a weapon of grace and a fine shield of sound
we can hear a familiar voice close at hand
the primordial song of a northern land
as it races the great sun over ancient snow
the drum beat is older than we can ever know
we've heard a journey north is a dangerous one
so ride hard through the skin of the nameless drum...*

(from the album 'Weathered Edge' by Carolyn Hillyer)

Carolyn Hillyer
writes about the
recent journey she
and her partner, the
composer Nigel Shaw,
made to Arctic Siberia
with Nenets tribal
singer Tatyana Lar



Above:
herding reindeer
on the tundra

We have been heading north for a long time. The journey has unfolded slowly over the last fifteen years, starting with unexpected concerts in Estonia, a gift in Latvia of archive recordings by Siberian tribal singers, and a sudden detour over the Russian border, without permits, to play to an audience of underground Greenpeace members and young army recruits heading to the Chechnian frontline. A journey north can throw up many surprises...

It was the archive recordings that opened up a view for us through to the distant north. These ancient voices, catalogued during Soviet times, belonged to singers from Nenets, Chukchi, Yakut and Khanti tribes amongst others, dating from the first half of the last century. We carried them home to Dartmoor and listened to them for several years before deciding to create a music project seeded by some of those songs. We searched

in Russia, Canada, Alaska, for contacts to connect these voices to living people, and communities where we might ask permission to work with the songs. Failing that, we linked funds from the subsequent album, *Ancestors*, to projects run in Siberia by Survival International. And we started to walk north towards the ice.

First, we travelled to a Sàmi region in Arctic Sweden. We

performed at the reindeer herders' winter festival and sat on ancient ice. Over four winters we wove songs and paintings and flutes and drums out of these cold journeys. We tasted silent snows and walked beneath polar skies. We searched for primordial echoes of our own Dartmoor hills across the white landscape; we traced a physical journey north in order to understand the chronological journey back into an ancestral memory of our own land dating back over twenty thousand years. On the frozen lakes we discovered things that felt familiar, and things that pulled us onwards to other, stranger, northern edges.

We decided to return to Russia. We were invited to an Expo of Northern Indigenous Peoples in Moscow, and found ourselves offering our music (and appalling Russian accents) at a gathering of tribal singers and dancers from all across Siberia.

We were given a language bridge in the person of Ruslan Alikulov, a young Russian journalist with a deep love of northern tribal culture. He was one of only a small handful of Muscovites we saw at that event; then and since we realised that there is very little awareness, interest or regard among most Russians for their indigenous tribes.

We met Tatyana Lar, who for many years has represented the Nenets people as their singer; she told us that, although she did not understand our words, she could feel the ancestors about whom we were singing. We made a plan to work together...

Over two years we battled Russian bureaucracy and the UK Border Agency for a visa to enable Tatyana to bring her Nenets songs to Britain. She is poor, single, and without contacts or influence – all things that immigration officers do not like – but tenacity and luck finally secured her a visa within two hours of the flight to England.

Tatyana was accompanied by Oksana Kharouchi as her translator for both Nenets and Russian languages. The concert tour was a joy and a revelation. Tatyana sang of her reindeer, and we felt the tundra chill pass over our heads. She sang of fearless nomadic women and strong nomadic men; she sang of the mother in the cold mossy ground and the father in the wide empty

skies; she sang the calls of tundra birds and the cries that summon the herds.

In the roundhouse at our farm, she showed women how to chew sinew for thread, grind birch burr for remedies, purify with spit and steam, and she enacted the secret rituals of women in the *chum*. We walked together on Dartmoor hills, and she recognised the land, pointing out where she would pitch her *chum* and where her reindeer would graze.

She met local herders of sheep and wild ponies, and was at once familiar with their methods and philosophy; she discovered that the family markings cut into the ears of moor animals are the same as many of those used for the reindeer herds.

We played a Dartmoor concert as a wild-eyed summer storm raged around us and people sat listening to the Nenets language curl around the dripping tent. She found a welcome among those who came to share her culture that far exceeded anything she would have imagined outside of her own community, and we were proud of this. Together we laid a trail to map our return journey to the far north.

Over two years we battled Russian bureaucracy... indeed the story was the same. Eventually, with Oksana's help, we were taken under the wing of the culture department in Salekhard, located in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region where the Arctic circle passes between the tribal lands of the Nenets and the Khanti people.

Once local government officials were behind us, doors opened, permits were granted, and we

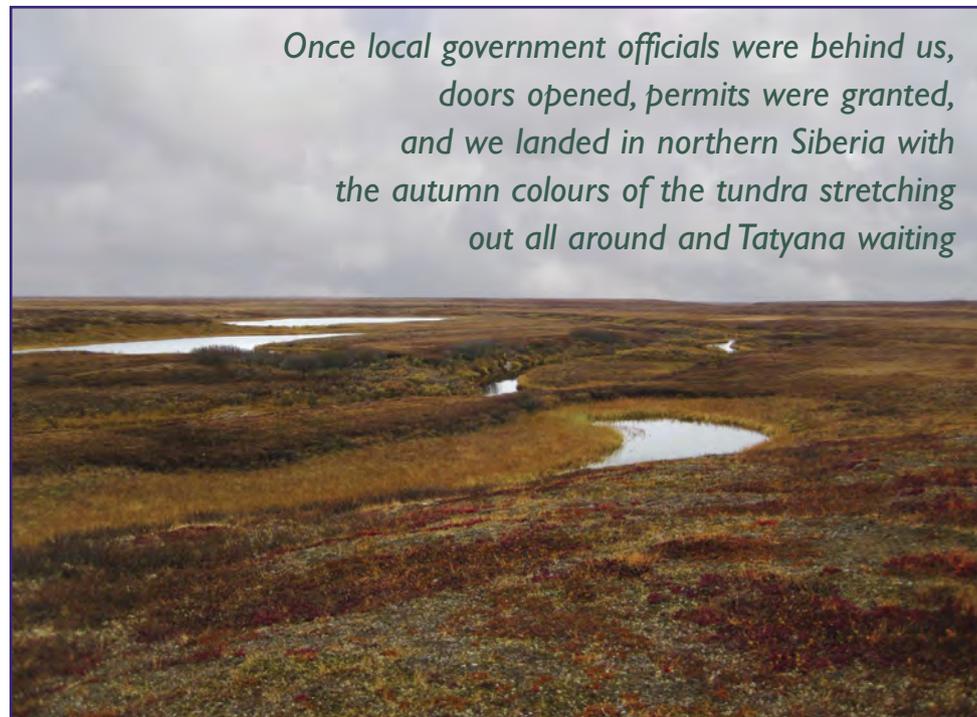


Above: Tatyana singing at the Nenets settlement in Novy Port

landed in northern Siberia with the autumn colours of the tundra stretching out all around and Tatyana waiting, with other Nenets women in full costume, to sing our reunion.

We all dived into an intense schedule of interviews, concerts and formal visits. Our concerts were entitled 'The Silver Deer,' the white deer or reindeer being sacred to both Nenets and ancient British cultures. The Silver Deer song itself had been seeded by one of those old archive voices, and we had been performing it together, with the original chant rising via a backing track through our own song. But Tatyana had recognised this ancient voice and sent word out in Salekhard.

Below: the wide open tundra



Once local government officials were behind us, doors opened, permits were granted, and we landed in northern Siberia with the autumn colours of the tundra stretching out all around and Tatyana waiting



Above: the author in a Nenets traditional reindeer skin coat

That evening a frail Nenets elder, Yelena Susoy, sat in the concert hall and listened to her own voice singing back across the many years. Afterwards she came slowly through the throng to meet us. She leaned close and sang into our ears. This meeting was wondrous; we knew her voice so well for she had been singing us north for fifteen years and at last we were able to thank her for the gift of it.

The deep heart of our journey still lay ahead, a long way up the Ob River towards the Kara Sea and out into a wild land of reindeer herds and the solitary *chum*.

Below: the Siberian town of Novy Port

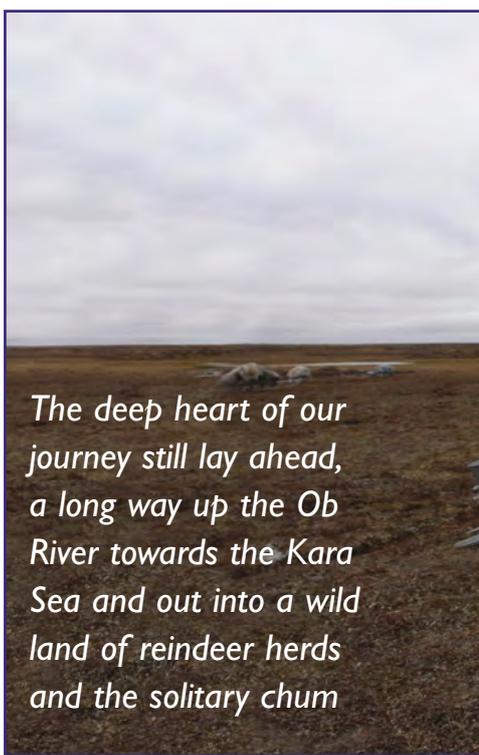
After a night and a day, the river boat reached the outpost of Novy Port. We embarked through a floating shop that sold watermelons and television sets far too expensive for most local people to buy.

But this old Nenets settlement, is valuable; some parts of it are derelict, disintegrating and sinking into mud but it rests above one of the largest deposits of oil and gas in the world. The authorities talk about the gasification of the region and this is evident.

The Nenets people have little access to this potential wealth of course, although amid the wooden shacks there is a splendid community hall and a large new boarding school, paid for by oil money and administered by Russians from the south.

Nenets children are no longer taken by force from their tundra homes and placed in state boarding schools (as was Tatyana herself), but other pressures are applied. Nomadic parents are persuaded that education certificates are necessary for their children's future, and from September until May the tundra is emptied of children, so that whole generations are growing up without direct experience of surviving the winter on open land.

Novy Port was used as a gulag prison in the decades following the



The deep heart of our journey still lay ahead, a long way up the Ob River towards the Kara Sea and out into a wild land of reindeer herds and the solitary chum

Second World War. The bones of tiny wooden shelters dating from that time can still be seen around the edges of the village.

A vast network of tunnels was hacked by the prisoners into the permafrost directly below the settlement. These tunnels are still used: in July and August they store the enormous fish catch brought in by Russian factory ships. Once the

fish have been moved south, Nenets women are employed for the rest of the year to scrape off the stale yellow ice left behind, then throw water and pat fresh snow onto the floors and walls of the tunnels and chambers until the entire labyrinth glitters and shines with a thick new layer of ice crystals, ready for the next summer's stock of fish. These are grimly beautiful tunnels, carved from the sufferings of the gulag population, most of whom never returned south.

We almost missed the final leg of the journey from settlement to *chum*. Word came that

After a night and a day, the river boat reached the outpost of Novy Port... some parts of it are derelict, disintegrating and sinking into mud but it rests above one of the largest deposits of oil and gas in the world





The land is a flat and wide expanse that reaches out to all sides; the lack of high ground means that any slight hill or raised bank becomes sacred ground and a site for offerings of small coins or reindeer skulls

Tatyana's family had moved their tents beyond a flooded river and the only route was very long. Besides which, the settlement had run out of petrol so there was no means of going so far. We could go by river, and someone located boat fuel, but when we arrived at the boat, the vast river tide had drawn the water far out from the bank into a distant line of grey.

Then we heard that one man might have both a vehicle and enough petrol to reach other relatives camping closer by; lengthy negotiations ensued before eventually, suddenly, we were on our way. A second vehicle with tow winch proved to be a blessing for the first sank into a deep bog within ten minutes.

We travelled to two *chums* pitched beside a small river, which we crossed by balancing delicately on a small raft made of broken slabs of polystyrene packing tied up in a fishing net. Near to the tents, around fifty reindeer grazed and

clicked their toes across the moss.

We were not staying here but collecting the animal that would be eaten later that day. Radik, who owned part of this herd, chose and roped a small deer while other men gathered five more to pull the sled. During Soviet times the herds were taken under state control and run as large collectivised farming operations. In recent years Nenets people have been able to return to owning and caring for their animals in family groups as they once did; for a tribe that has been so vulnerable to political control and commercial exploitation, this has been one change of benefit to their traditional way of life.

The reindeer was trussed and calmed and loaded onto the sled, which set off across the tundra while we followed behind. The lack of rock, stones, or even river gravel in the landscape surprised us; moss and low vegetation grow to a depth of 20 centimetres above the permafrost and the

bedrock rests far below. Thus the land forms a soft spongy surface over which a sled can run when there is no snow and ice cover.

Before the winter arrives however, and with it the ability to travel as the crow flies, the tundra is covered by thousands of water channels, lakes and pools left by the melting snow, all of which must be skirted around or forded so that any journey involves many winding detours. The land is a flat and wide expanse that reaches out to all sides; the lack of high ground means that any slight hill or raised bank becomes sacred ground and a site for offerings of small coins or reindeer skulls.

Clusters of sleds are scattered across some of these low slopes, packed with clothing and tent covers for the winter and awaiting the return of family groups from migration routes further to the north. Sprigs of wild rosemary are tucked into the sled ropes to discourage lemmings from chewing at the skins.

Above left: Tanya's chum on the tundra

Above right: a reindeer skull offering

Below: Nenets sledges loaded with winter possessions on the tundra





Above: dogs at the site of Radik's herd

We arrived at Radik's mother's *chum* towards the end of the day and the ritual killing of the reindeer immediately took place. The animal was strangled, a slow but tenderly enacted process that ensured no blood was spilled and wasted.

Offerings and prayers were made to the dying deer. The body was immediately skinned, the butchering was fast and within minutes the food was ready, a red soup of raw meat and organs and blood stirred within the cavity of the warm carcass.

Below: Tanya carrying a bag of reindeer legs across the tundra



Eating while the animal is still warm conserves energy and saves on cooking fuel. In winter this process happens even more quickly so that the meal may be eaten before the meat freezes, although frozen raw reindeer leg is considered by our friend Oksana to be a great delicacy. In fact to take a reindeer at this time in the year is rare; the autumn diet is usually raw fish, hare, duck and goose.

Nenets people love their herds and only kill when winter sits heavy and all other food sources have been eaten, but the arrival of visitors, including of course their cherished singer, was a cause for feasting. Men and guests ate first, women next, each person using a hunting knife to spear pieces of meat from the inside of the deer.

Two of us stepped out of 30 years of vegetarianism to squat beside the reindeer and join the meal. We drank from a pan of warm blood and walked to nearby willow scrub to tip blood as thanks over the branches. The meat was shared out a long way; the next day a bucket of guts and a sack of legs travelled with us as we walked back across the tundra, a gift for family in the settlement.

We all washed and entered Tanya's *chum* to share tea and whisky. In Nenets culture the *chum* is owned and maintained by the women. During the summer the tent cover is made from dark canvas, then thickened with layers of reindeer skins before the snow arrives.

The herds, hunting and all matters outside on the tundra, are in the care of the men. A woman alone, a widow with no sons for example, would struggle with the life; polygamy is still practised quietly among the older generation for this reason.

The layout of the tent is formal and closely adhered to in each home. There are designated places for water, wood, stove and provisions. Guests sit to the left, younger people to the right. Women sleep nearest to the door and never cross the area behind the stove. This taboo extends outside the *chum*; women do not walk across the back of the *chum*, even to a distance of a hundred metres from the tent. They also must not step over the poles used for guiding sleds or the ropes used for catching deer; otherwise these items become unusable. The back of the *chum* is sacred and formerly housed carved totems, the spirits of the home. During the Soviet era these were no longer displayed although some of the older people still have them, hidden away. The taboos are ancient and part of a fixed pattern of customs and behaviour that makes human survival possible at this harsh edge of the world.

The wealth of the nomadic women is measured in part by their tea cups. Tanya and her young daughter-in-law Vera each have a low table with drawers, in which their collection of china cups and saucers are carefully wiped and stored between newspaper after every tea drinking session.

Skins and furs, of course, are their most valuable possessions. Pelts of reindeer, Arctic hare and white fox are rolled in bundles around the edges of the *chum*, waiting to be sewn or traded. Young or baby reindeer skins are used for children's clothing, including hoods with the tiny ears sticking up on top. Each woman owns a large reindeer skin pouch, beautifully decorated and hung with metal beads; this contains her personal items including sewing kit and pieces of coloured felt for creating the trimmings on coats and boots. Tanya said the nomadic woman have trouble sourcing good strong needles; the Russian needles that reach the settlement snap too easily.

Women collect and dry sphagnum moss in sacks laid on poles above the stove; it is used

for washing and wiping, for padding baby cradles, for women's bleeding. During the autumn they also collect a range of berries that grow across the tundra, but this year was not a good harvest.

The *chum* is laid with skin rugs around the sides and wooden boards across the middle where most of the work takes place. A waist-high narrow plank rests by the open door, on which animal skins are spread for scraping and softening. The floor is swept with a goose wing.

Tanya and Vera each care for one half of the *chum*; in this way a younger woman can start to establish her own household. Young Nenets people have carried some aspects of modern existence into this old way of life; at our home on Dartmoor there is no mobile signal yet far out on this northern edge there is a phone, hanging from one of the *chum* poles, that connects the tundra to the world.

On Vera's side of the *chum* there is also an old television set, attached to a small generator tucked into the moss outside some distance from the tent, on which the family like to watch ninja DVDs dubbed into frenetic Russian. But primarily these people experience life at a level of basic survival in a hard land and they wear their years carved deep into their bodies.

Our day together folded into the night. We shared much tea and many toasts, strips of raw fish and boiled hare, and the pile of sweets and biscuits brought from the settlement.

We moved through slow translated exchanges to a place where it became less necessary to understand each other's words. Women from the neighbouring *chum* arrived, drawn in by the laughter. We all offered songs; Ruslan launched into a long and tragic Russian ballad with eighty verses but eventually we all made him stop.

During the exchange of gifts, Nigel's reindeer bone flute caused great interest. Nenets people do not have a tradition of bone flutes but Radik immediately worked out how it was made; during our trek the next day he could be heard over the tundra, playing the reindeer bone. Radik had a recent back injury and talked of finding someone to take away his bad spirit; the family agreed that they had only ever seen one shaman but this tradition, long ago



suppressed by the authorities, is still acknowledged on the tundra.

In the late night, two curtained partitions were unrolled from the poles of the *chum* so that each side of the tent was afforded privacy. The cloth was tucked under the floor skins to keep out dogs and draughts, and add to the warmth of humans curled close together under thick reindeer coats.

I woke to the sounds of Tanya stirring, grumbling about stiff limbs, muttering over the fire. I kept very still; in that moment, with eyes shut tight, I knew I was balanced on the tip of one toe at the very edge of this northern world, held up by an ancient song of land and reindeer and nomadic journeys and the taste of the winter to come, and that once I moved, I would already be walking a homeward trail.

Since writing this feature the author has heard that one of Tanya's neighbours on the tundra has died, swept away by the river; this article is dedicated to her and her family.

Carolyn Hillyer and Nigel Shaw are musicians and artists from Dartmoor in southwest England. Their creative output ranges from nearly thirty music albums to paintings, woodcarvings, traditional flute and drum making, art installations and a programme of workshops at their farm. They are moorland commoners and run a small herd of wild ponies on the hills.

The inspiration for their work comes from the raw beauty, deep spirit and ancient

memory of the ancestral landscape. They travel extensively with their work and have played regularly at major festivals including Glastonbury and WOMAD, as well as hosting Rivenstone, the sacred world music festival on Dartmoor. www.seventhwavemusic.co.uk

Tatyana Lar is a singer from the Siberian Nenets tribe who lives on the Yamal Peninsula in the Russian Arctic. She was born into a family of reindeer herders and has been singing since the age of four; each evening on the tundra her family would encourage her to sing about everything they had experienced so that the day was lived again in a song.

In 2007 she represented the Nenets people at the Forum of Indigenous People at the United Nations in New York.

Tatyana sings a blend of traditional songs and original compositions in her native Nenets language. Copies of her CD 'Seihead ngada syo' (Songs from my heart) are available from Seventh Wave Music.

See a review of Tatyana's CD in this issue of Sacred Hoop.

Ruslan Alikulov is a freelance journalist and photographer currently writing for the magazine *Severnnyie Prostory*. He lives in both Moscow and Kazan, and has made a number of trips into the northern Arctic regions. He has recorded a film of the journey shared by Carolyn, Nigel and Tatyana Lar.

Photos © Ruslan Alikulov and Nigel Shaw

Above:
Reindeer survive on the moss and lichen found the tundra. Without the reindeer there would be no Nenets people

Below:
Tatyana performing

