

900-year-old winter moccasins

This pair of winter moccasins, fashioned from deerskin, lined with cedar bark and laced with fiber cords, was... excavated from the extremely dry recesses of Mantle's Cave, in Yampa Canyon.... [They] were found cached in a shallow pit lined with bark and sticks.... The moccasins were probably made about 900 years ago by hunter/gatherer/horticulturalist people archaeologists refer to as Fremont, [who] flourished across central Utah and into Colorado.
—*University of Colorado Museum of Natural History*

1.

they must have been very beautiful:

soft deer fur with fibrous laces

shaping the leather around the feet,

the cedar bark and warm grass inside

fragrant, and finer twine

stitched through the soles

with a bone needle; perhaps

a mother made these for

a daughter or a son—

eight inches seems

reflections after the facts

Memorials of thy aged Friend
Dora! thou dost not need
And when the cold earth covers her
No flattery shall she need

Yet still a lurking wish prevails,
That when from Life we all have passed
The Friends who loved thy Father's name
On hers a thought may cast.

—from "To my Niece Dora" (daughter of William Wordsworth) as transcribed by her mother Mary, by Dorothy Wordsworth.¹

some artifacts from remote pasts

have evoked great meaning for me:

the manuscripts of Shelley and Byron

moved me with the energy in the hands

that scratched those fading traces.

i remember Dorothy Wordsworth's

journals, her unruly hand,

i remember a sprig of spice

no larger than a finger tip

that William Wordsworth had cut

too short for a grownup—
each inch of twine requiring
a different kind of time than hours,
each hole in the hand-cut soles
was made in time told by shadows
and sunlight, or grease-fire light,
and whoever wore these
probably knew their maker,
watched their making,
knew the hunter too
and how the deer was killed
and became this gift
from a canyon meadow.
we think they'd only do all this
for themselves, never imagining
that they could have wanted us
fifty generations later
to learn of their kind, their kin.

and inserted in a slit he'd made
in a page in a journal that
he carried around the hills.
the evidence of the body of
the poet a ghostly presence—
their dna still there,
and you could feel somehow that
that hand was actually there, once,
that is, if you loved them
and cared about being near
their ghostly traces,
their love of writing
cared for so meticulously.
but how they cared for each other
is all taken for granted by poetics
although their writings would have been
worthless without all their labors
of caring, all their loves.

2.

but now the fur is mostly abraded
and what's left is sketchy,
the reddish-honey hue
gives way to mud-brown suede,
the fallen ankles deformed
into yawning throats—
the left foot's big toe broken
(bitten?) off and the sole
beneath misshapen—
the holes in the hide reveal
how very thin they were,
how they needed stuffing
to stay warm. yet someone saved
this broken pair, valuing what
was truly useless—unless it was
to remember a lost one,
a beautiful youth who wore them.

recently, my research
has made me question
why there is a poetics of truth
and a poetics of beauty
but no poetics of caring.
the “high art” of poetry
disdained pedestrian caring,
which embarrassed philosophers
who were mostly male
and who configured aesthetics
without caring, which was (and is)
mostly the labor of women,
which was all but invisible
in the economy—
who would be paid to care?...
only a few were so moved in life
that their love—in art—still lives.

1. The text, DCMS 122, was taken from *Dora's Album* at the Wordsworth Library in Grasmere, England.

