

Praise for *Mammoth*

‘Chris Flynn has written a brilliant, hilarious and curiously moving novel, featuring one of the best narrators in literary history and – without a doubt – the single best narrator in natural history. I simply love this story.’ **Elizabeth Gilbert**

‘*Mammoth* is astonishing, a novel that is by turns playful, uncomfortably excoriating, very funny and always deeply humane. The voice in *Mammoth* doesn’t sound like a voice I’ve ever heard before and for those of us who love books and reading this is the pleasure and the hope that we are always chasing. This novel delivers. It is both a requiem for lost worlds and lost time, and it is also a sheer joy.’ **Christos Tsiolkas**

‘*Mammoth* is an extraordinary gambit of the storytelling imagination of Chris Flynn, and a new way of listening to all the narratives of what we have supplanted. *Mammoth* is playful and serious, encapsulating the macro-history of all life in the tale of one species.’ **Tom Keneally**

‘If you’ve been feeling like the novel is an endangered species, then *Mammoth* is the book to bring it back to life. *Mammoth* shows anthropocentrism as the laughable delusion that it is, while still affirming the value and significance of story. This 13,000-year-old skeleton is my favourite character in years, and this hilarious and heartbreaking book is precisely what we hominids need right now.’ **Emily Bitto**

‘Funny, warm and totally unique – I loved it.’ **Favel Parrett**

‘*Mammoth* looks at humanity’s impact on the planet through the eyes of a creature we once shared it with. The real treat is the voice of the central character – curmudgeonly and erudite yet heartbreakingly lost and confused, and utterly believable as a relic of a lost world.’ **Meg Keneally**

‘Chris Flynn’s riveting mixture of fact and whimsy makes previously foreign names like *Palaeospheniscus* and *Canis dirus* memorable fellow travellers like Huck Finn and Ulysses. He gracefully leverages history to help us think about the future, big pictures and deep time.’ **Dr George Church, Professor of Genetics, Harvard Medical School, and head of the Harvard Woolly Mammoth Revival team**

‘If a fossil could speak, it would tell a thousand words. Chris Flynn’s *Mammoth* elegantly fuses fiction with fact and reminds us that fossils are not just objects of curiosity and fascination. They are the remains of once-living creatures who had emotions, who fought, loved and survived. Flynn brings these extraordinary creatures back to life, from death to décor, through superb storytelling.’ **Dr Gilbert Price, Senior Lecturer in Palaeontology, The University of Queensland**



Chris Flynn is the author of *The Glass Kingdom* and *A Tiger in Eden*, which was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Book Prize. His fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *The Age*, *The Australian*, *Griffith Review*, *Meanjin*, *Australian Book Review*, *The Saturday Paper*, *Smith Journal*, *The Big Issue*, *Monster Children*, *McSweeney's* and many other publications. He has conducted interviews for *The Paris Review* and is a regular presenter at literary festivals across Australia. Chris lives on Phillip Island, next to a penguin sanctuary.

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Book club notes are available at www.uqp.com.au



A stylized black and white logo of a ram's head with large, curved horns. The horns are filled with a pattern of small white dots. The central part of the head is filled with vertical black and white stripes.

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**CHRIS
FLYNN**

UQP

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Washington Dec. 14. 1800.

Dear Sir,

Your former communications on the subject of the steam engine, I took the liberty of laying before the American Philosophical society, by whom they will be printed in their volume of the present year.

I have heard of the discovery of some large bones, supposed to be of the Mammoth, at about 30. or 40 miles distance from you: and among the bones found, are said to be some which we have never yet been able to procure.

The 1st interesting question is whether they be the bones of the Mammoth? The 2nd what are the particular bones, and could I possibly procure them?

The bones I am most anxious to obtain are those of the head & feet, which are said to be among those found in your state, as also the ossa innominata, and the scapula. Others would also be interesting, though similar ones may be possessed, because they would shew by their similarity that the set belongs to the Mammoth.

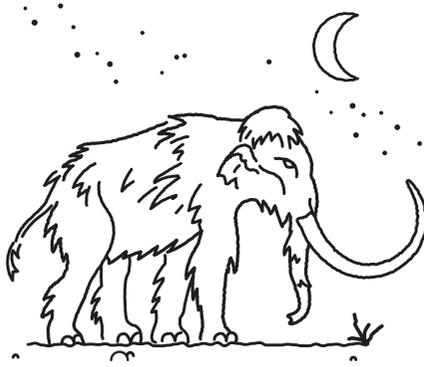
Could I so far venture to trouble you on this subject as to engage some of your friends near the place to procure for me the bones above mentioned?

If they are to be bought, I will gladly pay for them whatever you shall agree to as reasonable; and will place the money in N. York as instantaneously after it is made known to me as the post can carry it, as I will all expenses of package, transportation &c. to New York and Philadelphia, where they may be addressed to John Barnes, whose agent (he not being on the spot) will take care of them for me.

Accept assurances of cordial esteem & respect, & my friendly salutations.

Th: Jefferson

Natural History Auction
Fifth Avenue & 29th Street
Manhattan, New York
24 March 2007



The passage of time is difficult for me to parse. I know only that day follows night and then the sun goes down and the cycle begins again. Thirteen thousand, three hundred and fifty-four years is too great an amount of time to comprehend, and yet that is what I am led to believe has elapsed since the antediluvian days. The primeval struggle for survival. Man versus beast. Those were heady times.

We lost, of course. But we gave you a run for your money.

The first time I killed a man – that was a good feeling. Clovis, you were back then. You hunted in packs, just like *Smilodon*, and you were much weaker, but somehow also stronger, more resourceful. Clovis did not roam the grasslands. You stayed in one place. A group might live in a cave, or a basic settlement constructed from hewn trees. You worked marvels with your awkward hands, cleaving and building. Making things. Tools

and weapons. Representations of beasts you blithely harvested, carved from the severed horn of a *Coelodonta antiquitatis*, or from the tusk of my dead sister. Remember? The one you speared.

I hated you. We all did. *Glyptodon*, *Megalonyx*, *Arctodus*, *Camelops*, *Bison priscus*, *Equus* – all were hunted without mercy. You ate our flesh and wore our hides. You used our bones to fashion ever more complex butchery devices. You burnt the grasslands and forests. You starved us. You drove us to our deaths over cliffs. You hurled rocks and dug pits.

We fought back, but victories were rare. There were too many of you. You were as countless as the stars.

The taking of a life – even that of a pitiless biped – is no small thing. But it made me proud, at the time. You had plenty of bodies to spare. You wouldn't miss one of your hunters.

Every one of us that fell was a disaster. A repository of wisdom and ancestral memory stretching back tens of thousands of your so-called years. It is true what you say, after all. We do not forget. We cannot. When one of us dies, the experiences of thousands disappear with them. Our bloodlines carry more than a blueprint for tusk and trunk. They are replete with the history of family. To kill a mammoth is to kill its primogenitors. One piercing spear can destroy a lineage. This is why the arrival of Clovis in our lands was such an affront. You were bent on not just killing us for pelts to keep you warm in winter and for meat to feed your young, but on erasing us from the world. We knew that if we did nothing it would soon be as if we never existed at all. Our bones would sink into the tar. We would be forgotten.

You tried to ambush me where the canyon narrowed. You thought I didn't know you were up there, that I could not see the trickling pebbles that your strange feet dislodged. Also, I could smell you. Hygiene was never your strong suit.

I had walked that way hundreds of times and, just like my forebears, had rubbed my flanks against the rocky outcrop. Our kind had been doing this for so long that the stone was polished smooth, reflective as water. It was an excellent means of removing ticks and having oneself a good scratch.

I knew something Clovis did not. Those crags further up may have offered prime concealment, but they were unstable. Deep memory told me of how the mountain had collapsed when the earth shook. How it might do so again under similar pressures.

I threw my considerable bulk against the canyon wall. The loose stone crumbled beneath your bony feet. Boulders fell, and men with them. Those of you who were uninjured ran. One of you had an arm pinned under the fallen rocks. Your frantic attempt to push a boulder off the crushed limb was in vain. Your bloodied feet scrabbled in the dirt. It must have been frustrating, being trapped. Terrifying, perhaps, as I bore down on you.

You fell silent as I stood astride you. Choking dust swirled in the air. You closed your eyes and played dead. I leant down and nudged your body with my tusk. You opened your eyes again and squealed in pain. I knew if I pushed hard enough your arm would tear away at the shoulder. I considered doing that, but I am not like man. I do not torture for pleasure.

Your free hand slapped at the ground. You were attempting

to reach a stone knife that had fallen out of reach. Still had some fight in you, despite the odds. I admired that a little. Clovis was tougher than they looked. They clung to life with the ferocity of a cave bear protecting her cubs.

I made it quick. I placed a foot on your chest and pressed down until your sternum cracked and your heart was crushed. Your eyes went wide, and you spat blood over my leg. You expired in a moan of relief.

I wiped your entrails off my foot. One less *Homo sapiens*. The world was a better place.

Who are you talking to, *Mammut*?

That biped. The one with the glasses. I thought perhaps he could hear me, the way he was cocking his head.

None of them can hear you. Believe me, I've tried. And I've been around a lot longer than you, my furry friend. How old did you say you were? Thirteen and a half thousand?

It's been thirteen thousand, three hundred and fifty-four years since I died, in hominid years.

Amateur. Try sixty-seven million.

That cannot be possible. How are there any of your majestic bones left, great lizard?

Good genes, I guess. Avoidance of stress. The excessively dry climate of the Gobi Desert.

I thought you hailed from Florida.

The dealer's from Florida. He claims I'm from China, but it's not true. I was smuggled out of Mongolia. He's going to cop hell when they find out.

How does one go about smuggling the skull of a *Tyrannosaurus rex*?

Actually, I'm a *Tyrannosaurus bataar*. Some hominids call me *Tarbosaurus* but I hate that name, it sucks. We're distant relatives to *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Same basic deal. Go where you like, eat anything that moves. Die in a fight with a young bull or burn to death in lava.

Which was it?

Bit of both. Injured after a scrap, lay down to sleep, couldn't get back up again when the forest was on fire. How'd you check out, *Mammut*?

It's a long story.

We only have until tomorrow. After that, we'll be hanging in the den of some rich guy with a Jurassic Park fantasy. Still, beats spending sixty-seven million years in the desert.

When were you exhumed, *Tyrannosaurus bataar*?

Call me *T. bataar*, dude. Or *T. bat*. Or just *T*. Ninety-one, it was.

In 1991? So you've seen only sixteen years of hominid activity. Well, I have that on you, at least. They brought me up in 1801.

Full skull? Tusks and everything?

No, they had to piece me together. Things were a little hazy for a while but then, to my surprise, here I was. Back again.

It's a bit of a shock, for sure. I kept doing phantom lunges when humans walked past. I never got to taste one. If I were back to my old self, I'd bust us right out of here, friendo. We could go on a rampage in Times Square. Eat us a bunch of tourists and Captain America impersonators.

I'm an herbivore.

No shit? Bummer.

You'd probably try to eat me, *T. bataar*.

I don't know, buddy. Those tusks look pretty fierce. So, 1801, huh? You must have some stories.

Sounds like you're interested in hearing them.

You bet I am.

Careful what you wish for, *T. bataar*.

Look, I'll tell you what. I'll cancel all my appointments and inform my assistant to hold my calls. Impart your wisdom upon me, O great *Mammut* of the steppe.

No need to get sarcastic.

It's a trait of my species. Please. I'm so bored. Pretty please, with cherries on top?

Very well. Do you by any chance know who Charles Willson Peale is?

Never heard of the guy.

It all starts with him.

The Mammoth Steppe was a vast prairie that stretched halfway around the world. If you began walking at one end as a calf, you would be an adult by the time you arrived at the other. Bunch grass bloomed as far as the eye could see. Which was just as well, given how many animals relied upon it for sustenance. In addition to there being almost a million of us, we shared the plains with thirty million *Bison*, *Equus*, *Camelus*, *Glyptodon*, *Megalonyx*, *Ursa*, *Canis dirus*, and an endless swathe of *Smilodon*, *Panthera* and *Acinonyx*, all of whom were, quite frankly, a pain in the rectum.

The grasslands were punctuated with explosions of colourful flowers: irises and buttercups. They tasted awful. It was perpetually cold and sunny. Perfect weather for ensuring the water remained locked in the glaciers. It hardly ever rained or snowed on the steppe. As far as I was concerned, it was paradise. So, when I died – the reasons for which are complex and much too dramatic to delve into just yet – I lay down on the hard earth and accepted its embrace. I was tired of fighting and welcomed oblivion. My life came to a dignified end.

Little did I know back in 11,347 BC, as the hominids call it, I was in Orange County, New York. The spot I chose as my presumed final resting place became a farm just outside the town of Montgomery. A tiny burgh, by all accounts. Originally settled by German Palatines as Hanover in 1710, the place was apparently renamed after a general who fought in the American Revolutionary War.

I found all this out when Peale dug me up. It was most confusing. I did not recognise any of the placenames and I did not know what a Palatine was. Or a German, for that matter.

There's a pterodactyl next room over. She's from Germany.

This works better if you don't interrupt, *T. bataar*. Once a mammoth builds up a head of steam—

All right, I get it. Keep your furry hat on.

Where was I? Yes, Montgomery. Charles Peale. It is perhaps easier to picture the location of my disinterment by examining the painting Peale created five years later. Since I was somewhat

discombobulated at the time, his canvas is a useful point of reference. *Exhumation of the Mastodon* now resides in the Maryland Historical Society's collection, but since we are unlikely to be visiting Baltimore anytime soon, I shall endeavour to describe the scene.

Don't get fancy.

Pardon me?

I'm saying, keep it simple, *Mammut*. You're not delivering a lecture at Harvard.

Do you want to hear about this, or not?

Sure, as long as it's in terms I understand. I only learnt English in Florida last year. Cut me a break, furball.

My apologies, *T. bataar*. I forget you were resurrected a mere sixteen years ago.

I'm just a teenager, really, when you think about it. *Teenage rex*. An immigrant too. This is not my first language, bro.

I'll carry on, shall I?

Yes please. So, there's a painting of you hanging in a Baltimore museum? That's pretty neat.

Let's just say I'm not the centrepiece of Peale's work.

In the painting you can see parts of me, but mostly it's men digging up my bones. At the centre of the painting lies a pit, partially filled with water. A large wigwam frame towers over the hole. Attached to its apex are a series of buckets, running on a pulley system. A waterwheel situated between two windblown trees powers this contraption. A number

of hominids stand at the crest of the excavation, observing the men knee deep in the water below. These workers are conveying bones up to their companions – my bones, no less – the discovery of which appears to be a source of amazement. In the background are several tents, and a lightning strike flares in the distance. A bit dramatic, but that was Peale. This biped had a flair for showmanship. He and his family also feature, standing in the foreground, bearing an unfurled sketch of what I am supposed to look like once reassembled. Several of his children are present, though only one of his wives. Given the canvas was painted around 1805, I think it is Hannah More, his third. Thankfully she bore him no offspring. She had her hands full raising the sixteen he had already sired from two previous marriages.

The image is a confection, of course, as is most human art. Although I may not have had my wits about me after finding myself wrenched back from nothingness, I was acutely aware of my surroundings. Details tend to stick in the mind when your eyes are opened for the first time in thirteen millennia.

The scene was quite different to the one portrayed. It was raining, for a start. There was no lightning to imbue Frankenstein's monster with life. Just steady, miserable drizzle. The pit was a cauldron of mud and slime. The waterwheel had broken down and a large hominid was beating at it with a hammer while swearing profusely. Buckets of water were being passed down by hand, although those standing in three feet of fetid, freezing sludge and urine sorely questioned the need for them.

As for Peale, he was there all right, but only when the weather was not inclement. And his brood never accompanied him. Masten, the farmer who uncovered my femur in the first place, wouldn't permit children on the site. He was a tetchy fellow. All he cared about was how much he would be paid for my remains. The newly installed president desperately wanted the skull and tusks of a mammoth so he could prove to the French how great America was. In particular, his late nemesis, Georges-Louis Leclerc, le Comte de Buffon.

Buffon was a naturalist, and in volume five of his seminal book on natural history, imaginatively titled *Histoire Naturelle*, he had taken a swipe at the burgeoning new nation calling itself the United States of America. His Theory of American Degeneracy claimed that animals in America were weaker, smaller and fewer in number than in the rest of the world. 'There is no comparison between the size of the elephant, the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus, the camelopard' – that's a giraffe to you, *T. bataar* – 'the camel, the lion, the tiger, &c. and the tapir, the cabiai, the ant-eater, the lama, the puma, the jaguar, &c. which are the largest quadrupeds of the New World,' he proclaimed. This upset a lot of sensitive new Americans, none more so than founding father Thomas Jefferson.

When Jefferson sailed to Paris in 1784 to represent the new United States, he packed an uncommonly large panther skin with the idea of shaking it under Buffon's nose. Later, he produced a moose. The French were unimpressed. Desperate for America to appear bigger and better than everyone else – and to promote American democracy as the superior form of

government – Jefferson hired several groups of hardy pioneers to secure him a mammoth.

Jefferson had heard rumours of large bones found by explorers in various wilderness locations. He convinced himself that they belonged to a mastodon larger than anything that had ever existed in Europe. Indeed, he decided to promote the idea that such a beast still existed in the wilderness. A preposterous notion. My kind, like yours, was long extinct.

In any event, he was willing to pay through the snout for specimens, which is why Mr Masten was so hot under the collar about Mr Peale digging an enormous pit in the middle of his field. This was not the sole excavation underway. The race was on to be the first to provide the president with his coveted monster head. Money was at stake. Favour was there to be curried. Careers were going to be made.

Why was Thomas Jefferson so obsessed with securing my head? You have only been back for sixteen years, my predatory friend. George Bush Senior held the office of president when you were unearthed, as his son does today. You have mostly lived through the Clinton administration. I, on the other hand, have been back on Terra Firma for forty-one of the forty-three commanders in chief. Let me tell you, and I say this as an original American, nothing compares to this nation's willingness to promote patently false notions about itself in order to create a myth of American potency. Politics in this country has at its core an overcompensation for feelings of inadequacy. That is why men self-aggrandise so, and why successive paternalistic leaders have attempted

to overcome their inferiority complexes by appropriating symbols of strength from the natural world. Why else are we for sale in this draughty warehouse? Who do you imagine will buy us? You said it yourself, *T. bataar*. We represent power, for that is what we were: Behemoths. Colossi. Titans.

Incidentally, did you know that many adherents to Jefferson's doctrine engaged in similar practices? Republican presidents in particular have been notorious for collecting trophies. It is not giving anything away to reveal Jefferson did wind up with a mammoth skull at the White House, although it was not mine. He also kept two bears as pets. Calvin Coolidge possessed a veritable menagerie, including a hippopotamus, a black bear, and two lions named Tax Reduction and Budget Bureau. John Quincy Adams owned an alligator that lived in a White House bathroom. He found it amusing to surprise guests by sending them in there to defecate. In many cases, they were unable to remove their garments before doing so.

Theodore Roosevelt went much further. During his reign, a lion, a hyena, a coyote, five bears and a zebra lived on the White House grounds. He also shot a reputed eleven thousand, three hundred and ninety-seven creatures. Among them were again lions, but also leopards, cheetah, hyena, elephants and endangered rhinoceroses. These were mounted in a trophy room at the White House and are likely there to this day.

What great men they were! Enslaving and slaughtering our sisters and brothers, perhaps our descendants. What a boon man is to the world, helpfully clearing away its original inhabitants to make room for their grubby dwellings and mewling spawn.

You really have to hand it to them – they’ve taken a pristine wilderness that spanned the globe and brought it to heel with their concrete and firearms and technology. For this, they must be congratulated. Without their intervention, the world would be little more than a ramshackle, overgrown Arcadia.

I wish I had killed more of them.

Listen, *Mammut*, buddy, it could be worse.

You think so? We are the disembodied spirits of prehistoric beasts, *T. bataar*, condemned to live in the infernal world of bipeds for as long as our body parts remain above ground, instead of crumbling to dust in the earth as they were meant to. We are currently on display in a seedy warehouse, being poked and prodded by all and sundry. Then, once we are sold to the highest bidder, we’ll spend our days as museum exhibits, with grotty human children wiping their hands on our bones. How could our humiliation be any deeper?

At least we’re not million-year-old fossilised penguins, like the one in with all the smaller exhibits. Have you seen the state of that guy? He’s not in good health. Physically or mentally. I’ve heard they’re moving him into the main room with us later. He’s not generating much interest out there next to the mummy’s hand.

That is obviously stolen from a collection in Egypt. I hope it’s cursed.

Apparently she’s talking too. Demanding she be reunited with the rest of her body. She and the penguin are driving each other up the wall.

It's the indignity of it all that gets me, *T. bataar*.

Well, on the bright side, the humans won't be around much longer.

What makes you say that?

Asteroids, bro. You just can't plan for them. One minute you're lord of all you survey and the next – BOOM! Space rock impact. Cataclysmic environmental damage. Tidal waves, volcanoes erupting, dust blocking out the sun – the whole shebang. These puny cockroaches don't stand a chance.

How do you know there's one on the way?

It stands to reason, *Mammut*. I mean, it's been a while. Each day that passes where an asteroid doesn't destroy Earth increases the odds of it happening tomorrow, yeah?

I'm not sure that's empirically correct.

I'm telling you, bro. Watch the skies.

Where did you learn to speak English again, *T. bataar*?

I lived in a warehouse in Orlando for nine months. I was in a packing crate, mostly, but I picked it up from the guys who worked there. I've got a pretty good ear. I speak Russian and Spanish too, and a couple of Mongolian dialects: Khalkha and Chakhar. Not much call for those over here.

A little niche, perhaps.

How about you, *Mammut*?

English, French, Spanish, Italian and German, obviously, but also Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Afrikaans and a little Gaelic.

That's quite a lot.

One must occupy one's time somehow, *T. bataar*.

Do you speak the old tongue? I mean, the *old* one?

It had probably changed a little by my time, but yes.

That penguin jabbers on in it sometimes. Weird hearing it again. Poor little guy. I think he's lost the plot. I feel bad for him.

I heard one of the bipeds mention there is a *Canis dirus* skull in here somewhere too.

A dire wolf, huh? They were around the same time as you, eh? Maybe you know her, *Mammut*.

It seems unlikely, though I may have enjoyed a familiarity with one of her scions. We shared a compact with her kind for a while.

You made a deal with the wolves? That sounds risky, bro.

They proved honourable. In any event, we had no choice. We were forced to band together against a common enemy.

Oh, I know this one. Man, right?

Yes, my friend. But also, a much greater foe. Time. We ran out of time.

When the Neanderthal arrived on the steppe, they lived alongside us in relative harmony. They were truly stupid. They had at their feet all the materials required for the construction of shelters, and yet it never occurred to them to erect a wikiup. Instead, they fought with bears and lions for prime cave real estate. They hunted *Mammut* too, in their own pathetic way. Their spears were laughable sharpened sticks that bounced off our hides. Their sense of self-preservation was not very evolved. They would rut out in the open, exposing themselves to attack. My grandfather told me he saw a couple torn apart by a pack of *Smilodon* who snuck up on the humans while they were

copulating in a woodland glade. Talk about *coitus interruptus*.

We figured if these were the best hairless bipeds nature could throw at us, we would be lords of the steppe for the next million years. Then Clovis turned up. Their numbers were few at first, but we knew immediately they would be trouble. These bipeds were dressed head to toe in animal skins, carefully sewn together with bone needles. It was my introduction to the oddly intertwined human notions of pride and style. Fur was in that season, as it was to be every season thereafter.

If my stomping on one of the Clovis hunters seems cruel, it is worth stating that our numbers dwindled into the thousands after their arrival and subsequent domination of the landscape. The problem was one of natural selection. Clovis singled out mature bulls such as myself for our tusks. They fashioned them into thrones for their chieftains. My species was being wiped out so their leaders would have somewhere nice to sit.

Without the guidance of older males, the immature young bucks ran amok. They fought among themselves and treated the females poorly. Many cows died from injuries sustained while breaking up bulls that had locked tusks. They were too young to be suitable mates, and their progeny withered in the womb. Calves were stillborn. We were extinguishing our own kind.

Fires on the grasslands meant less forage. Trees grew where before there were none, and enormous forests appeared. That may have been great for the birds, but for megafauna? Not so much. It began to rain all the time. The ice receded. Snow fell on the plains, covering the grass in a layer of insulating white powder. It was getting hotter, and wetter.

I called for a powwow. Word went out to whichever old bulls were left standing in the region. We met with the female elders, representing the great herd.

‘Too many Clovis, and it’s getting too hot,’ I told the assembled proboscideans. ‘I say we head north and follow the ice.’

Not everyone was convinced this was a good idea, but many agreed to come with me. Most of the younger females came – they were smart enough to see the writing on the wall. The rest thought they could tough it out, that the Clovis expansion would be checked by nature, that balance would be restored. They honestly believed these new hairless bipeds were smart enough not to hunt their food supply to extinction.

They were wrong.

It was quite a thing to see, one thousand head of mammoth striding forth in unison across the steppe. We attracted considerable attention. It had not occurred to me that other species might feel the same anxiety we did concerning our potential annihilation. *Glyptodon* and *Bison* were never the brightest of vertebrates, and so our passage among their numbers was met with shrugs of indifference. *Megalonyx* were too laconic to be bothered even inquiring where we were going. But the beasts of the plains who were fleeter of foot – the *Equus*, *Canis* and felidae – exhibited a definite curiosity towards our mass movement.

The horses were the first to join our procession. It was a wise move, permitting them to come along. They proved a tasty distraction for predators. The noise of so many hooves attracted every big cat and wolf for two hundred leagues. I had never seen so many sabretooth, lions, jaguars, leopards and dire wolves

assembled in one place before. Great packs of them snarled about the edges of the herd, flanking us, unsure if they should charge en masse or fight each other. They seemed to settle on a wary armistice in the face of such abundant game.

You know what they say about cats, though. A few foolhardy felidae – and, in some cases, literal lone wolves – couldn't stand the heady scent of such an ambulatory smörgåsbord and waded recklessly into the breach. It did not go well for them. All attempts at separating calves from the herd were rebuffed by a cohort of bulls who at first were irritated by the attacks, but soon warmed to the task of actively taunting the observing packs of drooling carnivores.

Eventually, they sent a cowed envoy, requesting parley. I halted the herd and strode out to meet the alpha cat. An impressive dire wolf stood alongside him, bemused and clearly prepared for betrayal.

'Can I help you with something?' I said.

'If it's not too much trouble,' the *Smilodon* alpha said and purred, affecting nonchalance even though I could tell he was frightened of the much larger dire wolf. 'Would you mind telling us where you're going?'

'Why would I do that?'

'This constant chase is boring me,' said the big *Canis dirus*, yawning. I presume this was an attempt to intimidate me with his fangs. 'We'll run ahead and wait for you to catch up.'

'You'll be nice and tired by then,' said the sabretooth. 'We'll eat you while you sleep.'

'Very considerate,' I told him.

‘Consider it professional courtesy,’ the wolf said.

‘Best start running,’ I told them. ‘We’ll be along in a month or so, if you’re still alive.’

The alpha cat and dog looked at each other in a way that I have never seen two representatives of their respective species do since. I put them out of their misery by briefly summarising my intention and rationale.

Canis dirus turned away and looked up at the emerging moon. Crepuscular hour was ending. It would soon be night. *Smilodon* merely scowled, muttering under his breath.

‘We’ve been thinking along similar lines,’ the wolf admitted. ‘This balmy weather doesn’t agree with our kind. We were concerned there’d be no prey, but...’ He flashed me an accommodating grin.

‘So, tag along,’ I said, surprised at my munificence.

‘I think we will.’

‘What about your lot?’ I asked the sulking *Smilodon*.

‘Are the *Bison* going?’

‘Do you see any *Bison*? I thought cats had good eyesight.’

‘Fucking *Mammut*. Piss off, then, to your mythical ice fields of the north. We’ll stay here, where lunch is guaranteed. I’m not scared of those puny bipeds. We’ve dealt with men before. We’ll just kill them.’

Canis dirus took a deliberate step away from *Smilodon* towards me, turning as he did so to stand by my side. It was the closest I had ever been to a dire wolf that wasn’t trying to devour me.

‘The truce is over,’ he told the big cat.

‘It’s like that, huh?’

‘Yep. Run along now, kitty.’

‘Fuck you.’

The wolf and I watched him lope back to the array of cats, who shook their heads and laughed when he brought them up to speed. They skulked off to a safe distance to watch the herd. I don’t confess to understand how *Canis dirus* communicated the instructions to his pack, but they stood up and trotted towards us, coming to a halt at a respectful distance, so as not to spook the *Equus*. It didn’t work.

‘Were you really thinking of heading north?’ I asked the alpha wolf.

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘I just wanted to piss him off. I hate that guy. Good idea, though.’

‘Do me a favour and tell your carnivorous cabal to try to stick to the horses.’ I didn’t expect the wolves to betray their instincts, but it was worth a shot.

‘If I promised, would you trust me?’

‘About as far as I could toss you.’

‘Well, then. I believe we have an arrangement.’

Despite my scepticism, that proved to be a fortuitous day for both our species. We could not save each other, of course. Every four-legged creature that stood on that wide plain was doomed. But, for a while, we kept each other alive. There was still hope, still possibility. We did not know that soon we would all be dead.