Colin Simms
Colin Simms — selected bibliography


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OTTERS and MARTENS

Colin Simms

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CONTENTS

OTTERS

Shots at Otters

Watter had vitalled 13
Aggregate melt-water remembered in him... 14
Now that the rivers are bringing down some loam 15
Poaching up North Tyne without a leistor 16
lochside silverschistsand disturbed-to-black-below distributed 17
follow the otter 18
Green-bottle-blocks kelp-racks raise lumpily rubbing-slumping back 19
As you move across the room lines of a fault in the windowglass run 20
tell me if you know where the heart of man goes 21
Rank-tidestrandside neap 22
dibble out a mandible tight in stalactite 23
Intak-downhill-sodcastmending old man... 24
the place had quiet in it 25
Decoy backswamp willowgarth jetty 26
itch all 27
Otter dead on the fell 28
thumping gavel 29
Waterbailiff, it was 30
Stiff enough 31

Watters abate at tides’ hesitate 32
Sea Watch, S.W. Eire 1961 33
Outwits sight of the hound who doesn’t know his scent 34
Its whistle 36
sleeping off a good heavy feed 37
North Duffield and Bubwith 38
Otter Midden 39
Working the Otter 40
– Otter (is Not) 41
the calls they make are thin 42
walking waterline 43
molecatcher the otter has its fishing-seasons 44
Sea Otter 45
Solway Otter Sideways 46
By the Seph 47
Westmorland, 1978  
Otter and Fisher  
Otters in the Kirk Field Burn  
**Even if they don’t hear**  
**Snow shrank back to black lines alang banks and dykes**  
Squamish  
Otter in Floods  
*Dog otter of Corsenside whose burns*  
Meeting a riverine marten whilst waiting for otter  
*The dog otter with a damaged paddle*  
*alders bend over burns where their otters turn*  
Otterscat / at Derwent floods 1999  
*I thank you, Villon, for much*  
Lyvvenit; otter rived (it)  
*Young otter’s shrill call*  
*Vik on Alaskan coast owns*  
Nov. 16, 1997  
Scargill Otter  
*Otters swim often near the surface, little dips under*  
Corpses, living  
*the moon not yet up, but the comet is*  
follow the otter my fellow  
Dytiscid Beetles in Redesdale  
At the Farmer’s Arms (Muker)  
Otter, Redewetter  
Otters at the Crossgill Gorge  
bridge over river  
*the place had quiet when in it*  
(We’d been on the Tyne mouth for fish)  
for Roy Laidlaw, Jed Forest  
Otter, for Richard Hugo
MARTENS

Three Years in Glen Garry 85

nbounding is trotting-on in bees, humblin 86

breath-taking you lose him 87

Marten-Smitt Spots 88

Marten gait  Schubert’s 5th Symphony / The Running of the Fox 89

Chestnut’s hissing) 90

Starling, when it is almost over, 91

falling-over notes and 92

Great Lakes Woods 93

A way of martens through trees 94

(Northern Ontario Jan 1976) 96

One gin trap less 97

The Weasel of Great Smeaton 98

We live in all around us, Joy 99

Kits at Midden: 100

(Marten and lizard / moved on / after more sheep to come) 101

The soil no longer soil 102

off / sun soft as ease 103

7 May 1987 104

Aeolian 105

He came on a second, and, after, the fox; 106

Cisa Appenina between Milan and Pisa 107

American Marten in Northumberland 108

Long-tailed weasel 109

(from some Welsh fieldwork)... 110

Starting the Night-Shift 111

Isn’t Listening 112

(Male martens have ‘rests’.... 113

in the broken lands of the Ketilness 114

Running wick, leaping, loping, “sent” 115

“Lucky you got that skin; good news!” 116

Mart out of the trees beneath the thistles 117

March nightsweat, wondering where winter went 118

Marten, anchored into tree 119

Finned around pale bole old cottonwood 120

Castoring swivels big at ends of legs 121

scuffle at the double, Little Jack Russell 122

The day proved almost same gloom 123

Marten are in the ruined biggin 124

Only showing as dark wing-brushes 125
Marten at Rydal  126

Walking and working the many miles all weathers  127
Burren, Martens 1  128
Burren, Martens 2  129
(Mart – with Beryl  130
(S. Grillo, Brenda Richardson)  131
Antelope Marten Antelope Flats (Wyo ’97)  132
March 20; Cuddy’s Day  133
Feb 1st 1998  134

Least-weasels not so soft in tones  135

Marten lit / middle of wet  136
Marten deceives his pursuer (me...)  138
Nov. 3  139
Nov. 14 1997 / Eden  140
Marten and Otter  141

Mart, between squirrel-tail, puma-tail  142

It was, I suggested  143
Marten rising  144
Marten Hunting  145

A day I didn’t see marten  146

Batting at Hawnby  147

(He wanted to give his Army compass  148
Marten, North Riding Coast  149
(Sister) Jean, Rockies 1973  150
(from Tea at 40)  151
Vigil Trapline  152
Nov. 8th 1970 (Scarth Wood)  153
American Marten, Replacing the Pine Marten in England  154
At White Craig Picnic Site, evening June 4, 1997  155
Marten and Wild Cat  156
(Carcajou) Marten poems  157

brushing window his hail  158

weak as the sound is, it’s  159

Lines  160
Turdus torquatus  162

Marten in juniper thickets  163
“It is a few minutes only since we were looking at fresh otter seal almost at our doorsteps, and the thrill has not diminished since other occasions down this Tyne at Scotswood, up the Coquet and Allens and all manner of Northern waters up to seventy years ago. Colin Simms has a scientific treatise on otters being cautiously put together, but I hope this collection of his observational poems, pieces which first brought his work to my attention, will stand as a celebration of otters and their freedom, for the discerning. Long may the wild wanderer, and the unashamed poet, be at liberty to choose the way and where of living even to-day.”

Basil Bunting, Greystead 1983
Otter Dead in Water (Drowned by 'keeper) 1984
Aggregate melt-water remembered in him his territory this dog-otter
Scarlutra, Scargill Beck otter bigger, as hill fox is bigger
the same as only a few thousand years back to impermanent ice
may it be. Many a bitter winter since. This one skates ice like Skarp-Hedin
this otter - makes - water of grass
on land elements blend but in water this one braids and beads, surfs and lines
Swale to Tees defines and defies rain on the wind
nothing to litter eleven canoes in a wild weekend of one storm
the fastest rise in England after a storm these rivers his utter delight
repose displaced from the river’s loads to avoid learns ditches
adapts raffishly leaf-beat, bits of stick, stranded fishes
ground slick froth white-grime of flood-debris
makes the water work for him some fish leap for him, all-found
leaves gleam sticking to everything, all around.

Bowes, 1970
Now that the rivers are bringing down some loam
of husbandman’s love off these enlarged winter fields
not merely silt, which would quicken water meadows,
they’ve cleared the willows to speed the water’s flow.
Lings, otters’ homes, all else of alder-carr goes
a balance of centuries to the balance-sheet yields.

Floods will increase, and still they gripp
uplands, deep-plough for the new forests, let rip
earth-movers to straighten courses in places
they curse as stagnant, and drain out the bogs
had held the rain in, sphagnum, let it go slowly.
Nature reasserts with storms and man’s span
is merely money washed out with dead moles and voles
more for the crows. Lost less slowly; frogs and otters’ graces.

Vale of York floods 1968 for C.M.R. and M.E.B.
Poaching up North Tyne without a leistor
and in thin moonlight right-minded Oliver
heard a splashing coming, glinting lit-silver.
Oliver Davidson swung once, and gaffed an otter!
A heavy and long and fit and fussy dog-otter;
his follow-through such that the ruddery monster
landed up on the mossy bank above our Oliver —
the more surprised, whether exulting man or insulted otter
we’ll never know! But Oliver toppled over into the water
laughing after the otter cantered away, with a chunter.
Laughed at bruises big as cobbles coming later, did Oliver
but got his fish in that pool, anyway, evening after;
“got a verra bad chest for weeks, thought’d have it forever”
You can hear such gathering-burns laughing their way to the river

from Oliver in Tarset 1979
lochside silverschistsand disturbed-to-black-below distributed
pattern-padded pewter-grade velvet-hollows grains added otter pattern
wind off water levelling sibilant bevelling gritscreen bankscreed
whistle reminding you of distant wigeon whee-oo
lifting, see prints between bents-tail-race-slice-silt sift sting
still tracks slow upslope shorten portage not forage but for ages
we newcomers can begin to see pattern even from this little elevation
braids loosen elements-stream raise islands bruised-
petal-heartsease-violet trail wakes prospect of please not violence
increasing-in-confidence bolder heavier just before lost in boulders

when we were least aware the stiff log dogging windshore
sure-of-his-lie breaks cover sure-of-his-line leans lie of the land over
from under could not-have-hidden-him right-under-feet wonder
instead left-right losing-using his whole enters not-in-the-line-of-his-head
twisting quick long into the river’s plaited-in on-itself longitudinal as time
otters were here before
might be but rivers were like that
if there is still any life in them

Loch Maree 1970
follow the otter  my fellow
river my side-brother  running where put
(and no other)   and in own mind   find
the land running through is rich re-instating
relating each meaning to each
each belonging to each, the bushes bending over
the river no more to be said to belong to any one
than anyone of its waterdrops in the circle, the cycle
through sea and sky than any one of its many flies
may-flies living mere hours with man the air shared
above the river surface mingling wind and water
quiet turning of willow leaves on its is
smile on the face of the fisherman’s young daughter
caught in and made by the reflection, as of the leaves
have to be perceived together, alternative routes to the otter
are the roots of the otter and all other otters in their turn
take turn here, the dragonfly, even the sulky fish
it is for them only the beginning of their spontaneity

_The River Derwent, Yorkshire, 1975_
Green-bottle-blocks kelp-racks raise lumpily rubbing-slumping back deeper than slurping the-word-for-it-waiting sit in the rockslit waistling lenses swim perspective, help stack: cut-lawn; algae back-stooked raked enlargement grates, grit-to-pebbles-to-boulders cliffs round-off sky the same full tide overhead smooth grey west out-over hull-low undulate us that; was-that-dog-seal head-up down-back-bob nothing dents noting slabgrab at flab foam cream-off serpulid graffiti gravestones denying any present even as same head rears reluctant ears nearer defining otter: a feeling: not even a shape: agape; without form offer firm man in the cleft of the sky closed anemones torn fronds away midwinter turned the deep dive its pool debris brings the otter up again all rudder and silver submarine steel nose tightlipped at the full quiver little disturbed stones whisker to scale again the otter no matter of monster but smaller than sea seal kelp, boulder wave braver keener denser than wind that way.

near Peel, Isle of Man 1964
As you move across the room lines of a fault in the windowglass run
the two otters mist tipped together motes on pages
together-gathered guard-hairs grazed
short frost-lipped furred-grass run
must not touch the hush-hard through it seems it is not reel
anglers commute away complete with bags and boxes mutter a little steam
feel hear the warning like a slapping on water for otter soul
we are in a martial thing poles-pikes-advance
hair-up-at-back-of-neck dog-soldiers
tails up even at rear of ruck
leader strikes scent
everyone rises to something eskimo taut about every hunt hurt at heart
nothing like
fast toward black centre from grey sides somewhere past to the cave hides
from the sun

Northern Counties (Tees) hunt, 1960
tell me if you know where the heart of man goes
with no shallows to play in after he’s stopped lunging for tiddlers and tadpoles
with no clay banks to slide down, for to chute the right way when he grows
committed to gun and cunt struggling upstream dislodging setstones as he slows
not after otter but not content with a blank day
shoots the one he watches playing on the way where I was watching on the other side
like at the asylum-landing at Rawcliffe, Harrison riverman studied their muddy ride
cubs and parents year after year York folk never harmed them until the turn of tide
after the war brought more steel back home
and you don’t hear them bark or whistle near the busy boatyards any more
or they go linked-arm by the willows or lifting skirts to the flood-mud shore
and the island hover even the ‘touched-in-the-head’ kept-in-the-head where he saw
otters above ground in daylight, otters chasing moorhens,
so that boys only had been initiated to it when they were sure.

_Cascades Oregon hunt 1973_
Rank-tidestrandside neap
smooth furred skin coming away from sealexcorpse stained by slurry
ships-oil-can and boxwood
piles of fish-with-the-best-bite-out rot, oiled guillemot
with difficulty recognised with salt slant eyes memorised
the old dog-otter one-foot-short reduced to a scold natter of bones and scavenge
with dog-fox one night and the dog the next, near sized
still had open eyes from the drifters’ revenge
on the North Sea, the dump of damned sprats in heaps, neeps too many for market
moon threat over them
sun not needed
godwits receded after wet horizons reducing sluicing polluting slicing diffuse
place defused of one power cracked for oillit up chemical underwear
detergents deproof otter underfoot.

Seal Sands, Teesmouth 1965, 1976
dibble out a mandible tight in stalactite
badger it loose carefully prized or might-be-otter
compare osteologically to be fair
the weasel-family share some structure

cconcerned to discover what-comes-up-from-a-place
hard impressions to put flesh on lines-to-a-face

but we don’t know individual-behaviour-same-stricture
what river-otters were doing
to be interred in high-ridge caves even in human burial-cysts
an accidental en-fracture
what when these high-dry hills were not
high dry hills but
so “what does it tell you what is it worth”
decent-clearing-events of small patch of an old earth.

bonecave, North Pennines 1969