

## *Ancestors & Species*

**Also by Tom Lowenstein:**

*The Death of Mrs Owl*

*Eskimo Poems from Canada and Greenland*

*Filibustering in Samsara*

*Filibustering in Samsara — A Footnote*

*The Things That Were Said of Them*

*Ancient Land: Sacred Whale*

*Sea Ice Subsistence at Point Hope, Alaska*

*The Vision of the Buddha*

*A Social History of Tikigaq, Alaska*

TOM LOWENSTEIN

# Ancestors and Species

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Ethnographic Poetry*

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### *Acknowledgements*

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# I

## Introduction and Note

The poems in this volume have all emerged from ethnographic work in northwest Alaska and come from three separate periods of writing spread over thirty years. I first went to the Arctic in 1973 with the mildly confused intention both of recording traditional stories and writing a long poem in the open field idiom. But the intensity of ethnographic work and the power of the material I encountered in Tikigaq (Point Hope, Alaska), soon put paid to the second ambition. With the exception of *Episode with Hawk and Shaman* which was sketched in situ, everything here was written looking back to Alaska from Europe.

The pieces in Part I register three responses to the often confusing impact of the native New World on a non-scholar from Europe who was struggling to comprehend the patterns of widely separated but submerged ancient cultures which seemed obscurely once to have belonged to each other. A note to *Labrys* from 1987, the first poem reprinted here, gives the context of that search:

Written at Phaistos (Crete) after meeting on the road a woman about to return to the north of England, while I was due back in the Arctic. The poem attempts to explore this woman's sudden absorption into the labyrinth of archaic female history and her consequent meditation. This reaches far beyond her [disingenuous] 'centuries ago', to a quasi-Palaeolithic dream-time whose images nonetheless derive from northwest Alaska and pre-Alaskan Beringia (the Bering Land bridge).

Here I should add in explanation to this poem that the village where I worked lay within the northern zone of what had once been Beringia: that perishingly cold steppe which for thousands of years during the last ice age joined the regions that the Bering Sea would later separate into Europe and the Americas. The small bands of Eurasian tribespeople who later became Native Americans travelled this region and hunted (and perhaps contributed to the extinction of) the Pleistocene mega fauna – steppe bison, woolly rhinoceros, elk and not least the mastodon. The Inuit people with whom I studied had no memory or knowledge of this remote period. The mastodon, which figures in this poem and in *La Tempesta's X-ray*, was known to the Inuit, however, because they often found teeth

and tusks in river cliffs and similar mud burials, and they assumed it to have been a giant burrowing rodent. This they called *kiligivak*, a word that entered the human naming system and attached to a man born ca. 1865 and his son (Jimmie Killigivuk) who was my principle informant. From these two circumstances flowed part of my preoccupation with Beringia and the mastodon hunt whose ceremonial elements perhaps paralleled later Inuit brown bear and whale cults. A second unverifiable imagining concerned the power and status of Paleolithic women. Prompted by experience of 20<sup>th</sup> century Inuit women, I projected a matriarchy (at least a psychological one) onto ice-age women and attributed to them a compendium of cultic and subsistence skills from which they pushed through into the Neolithic. The anonymous woman whom I saw casually leaving the ruins of Phaistos, where the goddess Rhea had been worshipped, is thus dragged back into a labyrinth of time and cultures, to become the poem's narrator, a witness to Old World/New World interrelationships, free-associating over dreamlike spaces of prehistory.

While Beringia lay underfoot, a back country of myth and shamanistic lore possessed the aged mastodon from whom I was learning community traditions. Jimmie Killigivuk (1891-1980) was the oldest man in a rapidly modernising native society, and as he recited stories, sang magical songs and reminisced about his parents' and grandparents' generations, it was as if he peeled the 20<sup>th</sup> century skin from the village to reveal layers of vaguer and slower strata where the ancestors continued to walk between the old earth and whalebone iglus.

Once I had been working with Jimmie Killigivuk for six months, I too began to experience the composite, historically syncretic nature of local time. Many things happen all at once in this sphere. The myths come alive, the ancestors chatter and intermediate events, such as the arrival of traders and church men in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inhabit a fluctuating medium that co-exists within the archaic and the modern. This must be an experience familiar to many historians, and it is what informed both the previously untitled *Shaman Episode* and later, *La Tempesta's X-ray*, with its more diffuse evocation of times and cultures.



### III Ancestors and Species

#### Note to the Reader

These passages are from a narrative poem written in 2000-01 about life and work in Tikigaq during the 1970s. I had been working for about seven years on a book about 19th century contact between Tikigaq and Euro-Americans, when Clio (muse of history) was kicked into the wings by one of her pushier young sisters and the non-historical pieces printed here forced their way out until I had to return the commissioned prose book (*Ultimate Americans*: 2007). I hope to complete the cycle with accounts of storytelling, local journeys, sea ice hunting and, in 1977, the arrival of TV.

While the past informs most of the loosely organised fragments published here, much of the experience recorded in these poems was comic. Over many months of visits, few days passed which did not burst, at some point, into hilarity, and I was lucky to find that I was a reasonable joker and could also supply involuntary exhibitions of ludicrous behaviour. The comedy sometimes burst in on the most solemn moments. The first experience of this happened on the morning of my arrival when I walked to a whalebone monument at one of Tikigaq's ceremonial sites and watched a flock of migrating whimbrels that had stopped to rest on some upright whalebones. This experience defined one point of entry: a silent, casual intersection of the past (the jaws of whales caught by long dead hunters) and what quietly passed through. In contrast to this moment, the trickster Uqpik, in whose house I had a few hours previously become a guest, had, while I was out, composed a greeting: his song about a gull which he imagined filling my upturned eye with its dropping (p.114). Uqpik's satire on a new white visitor travelled fast through the village, and by that evening the laughter it provoked had cut a second groove for me to settle into. It was helpful to learn this early in my work how casually the solemn and the comic co-exist with each another.



## Asatchaq in Fairbanks

*The events in the prose introduction take place in and around a nursing home in Fairbanks, Alaska, September 1975. Asatchaq, born 1891 in Tikigaq, is convalescing here after an attack of pneumonia. The writer has travelled to Fairbanks from Tikigaq and together they plan to move back to the village to record traditional stories. North Alaskan Inuit call themselves and their language 'Inupiaq'.*

I.

Asatchaq's nursing home is at the edge of town off the highway to the airport, and sometimes on my way to visit, I stop at Macdonalds to fetch him a burger.

The old man's always hungry. Here in Fairbanks, 600 miles from his village on the northwest coast, he's starved of wild meat. *Niqipiaq* (real meat): caribou, whale, seal, polar bear.

'That's what I call it.' He thrusts out his jaw and grabs the Macdonalds with strong back teeth to trap it securely.

'These teeth,' he gestures one day to his canines, 'they're called *kiugitiik*. They're like a polar bear's. I always had these front teeth. Like a polar bear's. And when I was born, I never ate whale meat. Only *tuttu* (caribou) or seal meat. Until I was twenty.'

'Which *anatkuaq* (shaman) put you in taboo?' I ask him. The old man cocks his head and squints. He drags the left side of his mouth down when he's thinking. It's as though, as he does this, broadening a screen within him, scenes and people enter. They've been sixty years gone. They enter fresh and lively. Then he projects them.

'It was Tiguatchialuk. He was the shaman. He showed my mother the three spirits at Itivyaq. My father paid him. Gave him ivory and seal skins. He shamanized for us at whaling. When my father caught a whale in 1920 and they pulled it from the sea, they found the shaman's tooth marks on the flipper. He'd bitten that flipper when he visited the spirits. But when everyone ate whale meat, I ate polar bear . . .'

It is mid-September and I've come down from the village. It's still hot in the interior. No one up there knew Asatchaq's whereabouts.

'He's having a rest,' was the neutral, sometimes guarded opinion. After all, he's 85, his breath comes short and his knees are crippled with arthritis.

Asatchaq is vague about the future. 'I'm going back. When you go back, we'll go back together. Then I'll tell stories.'

He's started already to prepare his recitations. Since our first meeting he appeared to have re-entered an otherwise abandoned history which reached back to the 19th century, then to myths and legends, which then with some difficulty curved round – as the myth world was packed off by contact with the white man – to meet the nineteenth century. Born at the end of his native tradition and the start of the first Christian dispensation, Asatchaq knew the values both embodied. And though feared and shunned by many in Tikigaq as the last of the pre-Christians, he was nonetheless respected as the village scholar.

In the meantime, this hygienic island, this pleasant, sunny, well-swept bungalow is his refuge. And to the white folks running the home, Asatchaq is just another pleasant-mannered ancient. Not that any resident's neglected. But their native past, in complex memories and opaque languages, is unreachable.

Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Gwitchin, Koyukuk, Tlingit, Ingalik, Aleutic. Most of Alaska's natives, Eskimo<sup>1</sup> and Indian, are represented here, living out their final days in virtual silence. Stranded in their rooms and in front of the TV, the old folk sit, in thrift-store shirts and trousers, like a patchwork map of tribes from a country the size of France and Scandinavia, and whose people, in their far-flung river and coastal villages, seldom meet each other except when they come to be cured of white men's diseases, or to die in comfort and isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> The Eskimos of Alaska call themselves *Inupiaq* (singular: 'real person'), the equivalent of the Canadian Eskimo *Inuit*, but natives and non-natives still call Alaskan Inupiaqs *Eskimo*.

3.

As for me and this archaic stranger, I'm as innocent as the nursing aides and high-school kids who clean the room and change his linen.

I've spent six months in Asatchaq's village, and now it had taken me three more to find him. As I cycle from town in the late summer sun, it seems suddenly too easy.

'Jimmie? Oh sure! He's in Room 19. Turn straight down here and his room's ahead of you. He'll be real pleased to visit!'

I walk down the passage and stop briefly in the common room. *Charlie's Angels*, re-run for Alaska, is playing. A Yup'ik woman from St Lawrence Island, in a flowered calico parka-shift, sits curled in a wheel chair. Thick blueberry-coloured lines, tattooed on her cheeks before she ever saw a white man or an Indian, track through her wrinkles.

An old Athabascan from the Yukon River sits next to the woman. His eyes blaze with cataracts. He may never have seen a coastal Eskimo. His ancestors reached here eight thousand years ago; hers six thousand later. If they share any language and happen to talk, it must be in dialects of village English. She would be a Presbyterian, he an Episcopalian or Catholic.

4.

The door of room 19 is open. The old man's asleep. I stand at the threshold looking in on Asatchaq, or Jimmie Killigivuk. The name Asatchaq is from a shaman namesake who died the year before he was born in 1890. 'Jimmie' and the surname given by the missionary, comes from his father, Kiligvak, 'the mastodon'.

I hang there in the doorway. Bed, locker, armchair, Zimmer frame. Polished vinyl floor tiles. Behind the bed, a picture window. Birch, spruce, aspen, cottonwood and fire-weed crowd a rough lawn. Chickadees play in a dusty willow. Bees mumble rag-weed. A dragonfly shuttles through clumps of mosquitoes.

A generator thumps quietly in the background. The janitor in shirt-sleeves walks by with a metal tool-box. He's whistling a Dolly Parton number. A Monarch shimmers past him. Winter will freeze all this in a fortnight.

5.

Asatchaq is stocky, bow-legged, wears black trousers and white shirt. His short grey hair is neatly barbered. He sleeps curled with his right side to the doorway, shirt-sleeves rolled neatly. There's a walrus and anchor tattooed on the slack skin of his forearm and below the tattoo he wears a wrist watch. Black-rimmed glasses.

I call his name and Asatchaq half-rises, casts round for his slippers and adjusts his watch-strap. Then straight-backed and in quizzical anticipation, he recruits his awareness and extends a muscular right hand which grips mine softly. I think later of the work this hand has accomplished. The tons of meat, blood and fat it has harpooned, lifted, hauled, skinned and butchered. The nets and rifles, slings, snares, lashings, dogs and skin boats it has managed. The drummings, dances, rituals, sexual escapades it has engaged with. Now yielding and domesticated, this Inupiaq hand meets its would-be ethnographer.

'What's your name?' the old man asks me.

'Aniquayaaq,' I offer him in shorthand, hoping the name I've been given in the village will prompt his curiosity; and in this I'm lucky.

My good fortune lies in the power of the namesake. For the names of the dead, transferred to the living, revives and re-incarnates the ancestors' identities. To be given a kin name was thus to be in village history.

'Aniquayaaq!' growls the old man fondly. 'Who gave you that name? My father's harpooner was Aniquayaaq.'

I sit on his bed and we drift into silence. I give him village news and he digests it with indifference. Half an hour passes. I am doubtful of the future. Then the old man says suddenly: 'Sure. I'll tell stories. We'll go back together. We'll go home to Tikigaq.' When I rise to go home he scarcely seems to notice.

6.

White men are not new to Asatchaq. When he was born in 1891, there were whites already in the village. First, in 1887, came whaler-traders five miles down the beach at Jabbertown. Then Dr. Driggs, the missionary, arrived in 1890. Asatchaq's parents traded with the white men, but they didn't convert to Christianity.

When Asatchaq started school in 1900, Driggs gave Asatchaq a surname, after Kiligvak his father. Downriver, to distinguish him from other Kiligvaks, people called him *Kiligvauraq*: 'little mastodon'. Kiligvak died in 1925. Killed they said by a female shaman.

I close my eyes and think of the inlet north of the village, then paddling downstream in Niguvana's skin boat. From the high banks on the river, muddy *kiligvak* tusks dislodge and tumble. Months later, one sun-lit midnight on the north beach, I am pegging out a fish net and scoop out a fossilized *kiligvak* molar. It lies on the dark stones, golden and perfect, the surface sharply ridged for mashing and grinding Pleistocene grasses.

The first Americans followed mastodon, mammoth, woolly rhino, lion, elk and wild horse towards Alaska through Beringia.<sup>2</sup> When the glaciers melted about 15,000 years ago, the rising sea divided the new continents. The ancient beasts in both Eurasia and America fell victim to climatic change or over-hunting. *Kiligvak*, back then, was an animal both hunted and worshipped. Later, the Eskimos believed that they were giant, subterranean marmots. Nonetheless a powerful namesake.

7.

The road to the nursing home starts with a roar of traffic-dust, and peters out in scrub where the railway meets the river. This is the stretch I like walking or cycling. Town life dissolves. Willow, birch and meadowland with a scattering of little cabins take over.

It's quiet here and usually deserted. Who inhabits the small, tight houses in this dusty suburb? I wander round them. Spearmint, yarrow, willow bark, dried mushrooms stand in jars behind one window. A dog lies by the house-steps. A tiny, symmetrical spruce tree grows next to the kennel.

Besides herbal doctors there are also Buddhists down here. One cabin has green wax Bodhisattvas in the window, a wall hung with images of Tantric deities, and a neat row of incense burners in the form of laughing Chinese sages.

Then just across the meadow lives a family of pot-heads. In blue and white gingham, Darlene, on the front stoop sorts through berries, fixing up her winter pickles. Brad is home from a pipeline construction camp.

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<sup>2</sup> The Bering land bridge and its surrounding territory.

He's made a miniature suit of medieval armour in the workshop. Halberd extended, the iron man guards an old whiskey crate from which grows a bush of marijuana fed by outhouse-oozings and mantric vibrations. A mandala proclaims *Om* in a lotus.

At the end of the road, the Department of Parks has converted some rough land to a baseball diamond, complete with link fence and a stand of benches.

Before cycling home, I watch women playing softball in the evening sunlight. Today is the final between Swann's Drilling Team and Friths Fossels. They are union workers from the pipeline companies: pipeyard women from the 'Over Thirty-five Geritol League'. Husbands, boy friends, children and colleagues lean on pickups shouting.

'O.K. girls! Let's play ball!  
That's the way, Trudi!  
Swing, Swing, Swing!  
And Go! Go! Go!  
Let's force the third! Swing, girls!  
Stay ready out there, Trudi!'

Trudi, cropped and handsome, forearm bandaged, skies the ball into the wasteland. Two home runs, and the league's over for the season. The women crowd the trophies on the bonnet of a big Dodge pickup. A big man stands on the pickup bonnet and delivers a speech. Balls and fannies, cheers and whistles, punctuate his cheerful encomium. Trudi steps up to accept the first trophy.

8.

An ice-cream van painted with flaring utopian iconography stands in the car-port outside the nursing home. Planets, UFOs and Third Eyes float in a paradise of Himalayan temple-gardens. Wise men and female nature-spirits sprawl in the foliage round the driver's window where a bearded young man in army fatigues sits reading Zap Comix and smoking a Camel. Lured to the scene by Schumann's *Träumerei*, a girl limps through the swing doors, buys an ice, requests a cigarette, lights up and retreats. The ice-cream music switches to a lullaby by Brahms and the van drifts away towards the river.



9.

The track by the river twists through the scrub past some cabins where urban Inupiaqs have settled. They come here from the north to work as carpenters and electricians. Their families visit them; they move home to their villages; cousins and children travel down, and then others replace them.

This isn't a bad spot. They set snares for squirrels and rabbits in the brush near their cabins. Moose and red fox wander through. In the winter they fish through the ice on the river. I hope no-one bothers them.

Some afternoons I stroll round the lake in an old gravel pit. Owls take over from the loons and pintails in the early evening. I find pellets fretted with white scapulae and jaw-bones. Yesterday a rabbit skull. Caved-in but intact, it was stuffed with dried coyote excrement — its own digested, defecated self-meat, packed deep in its cranium.

10.

His English isn't good. My Inupiaq is rudimentary. The history is complex. I get tangled. It is late October. The window is dark and a folktale floats against it. I strain towards the old man, scrawling disconnected bits and pieces in my notebook.

*Someone travels to the other side . . . East Cape, Siberia. There are fights, gestes, tricks and a shamanistic murder. Someone is flying. The traveller maintains a difficult posture. His amulet is a mythical creature involved in the killing. Retreats and counter-shaman visits. Tikigaq and East Cape swing unsteadily across the sea ice, requiting their losses and changing places.*

All this is obscure and untidy. What Inupiaq I've learned comes quickly unravelled. Asatchaq's talk is involuted. I shift, sweat, stammer questions. Asatchaq is very disappointed. He knows how little I understand. He withdraws with a mean-looking sneer, returns half-heartedly, then drifts into silence. 'You should listen,' he growls, 'then you'll learn the story.'

If this was the moment he chose me to enter –

the voices of forebears chiming through the mastodon's persistence—the direction was obscure and the passage narrow.

Had I trespassed already on some elder's arcanum?

*The old man limped through Tikigaq nuna.<sup>3</sup>*

*I followed dumbly. He tramped the north side through the beach stones,  
stopping to name iglus<sup>4</sup> long since abandoned,  
their driftwood beams and whale-ribs jutting  
through grass, saxifrage, anemones and poppies.*

*In the mud-banks that had fallen we found stone points, fish-hooks,  
bird skulls, relics of old ribs and vertebrae  
whose meat and oil had long been digested.*

*Asatchaq idled at graves marked by whale-jaws:*

*Atanauraq's, Siuluk's, Talaaq's and Ayagiyaq's.*

*These – beside his namesake – were village shamans.*

*Wherever they'd gone, the trail their ghosts had carved was bony.  
The track was contorted, spined with ivory and antler.*

*Cold the access. Deep the strata.*

*'I'll give you their songs,' (his voice reluctant),  
stirring with his cane in the skeletal rubbish.*

*The ancestors' jaws lay in vaulted series,  
teeth cleaving to him and to me by proxy,  
as the old man pointed down and inward.*

*Such might be the journey.*

Such, also, I feared was the old man's venture:

the threat of some grimy, irresolute initiation.

For months I'd wandered the peninsula jaw-line.

I knew its physiography, nomenclature and ritual places;  
had mapped old iglus; plumbed a 19<sup>th</sup> century entrance passage.

The thing was alive. The earth bristled with reminders.  
The Point glowed with eroded whale-bone stubble:  
porous white and grey striated bowhead mandibles,  
club-ended ribs and honeycombed and honey-coloured vertebrae.

Sealing the mouths of abandoned iglus on the bluff-edge

where the whale boat owners cached their *maktak*<sup>5</sup>,  
lay walrus skulls, and fraying at their edges  
elegantly winged belukha<sup>6</sup> scapulae.

These were relics of the 19th century.

Animals and humans mutually consorted.

---

<sup>3</sup> *nuna* = earth. Italicised passages, as here represent thought- or dream projections.

<sup>4</sup> traditional semi-subterranean house. <sup>5</sup> whale skin and blubber

<sup>6</sup> white dolphin

## At Uqpik's Cabin

Capping the ruins and scattered through the village stood the 19th century traders' cabins: tightly constructed clapboard houses with thick tar-paper insulation. Five of these houses, dragged back from Jabbertown<sup>7</sup> along the south beach in native skin boats, survived in the village.

Uqpik's<sup>8</sup> stood near the western end of the peninsula. It had been Max Lieb's cabin, bartered by his family when Lieb froze to death in 1902 on foot to the village from Cape Thompson<sup>9</sup> where he had been starving.

Lieb's house stood alone on flat ground near a grassy beach ridge, set round with iglu pits and their ruined whale bone tunnels. Still more remote, and infested with families of wild, nesting huskies, stood Asatchaq's cabin. Sixty years back, his father Kiligvak, 'the mastodon', had built it with lumber he bought from a Jabbertown trader — the first native frame-house in the village.

Perched near the south-west tip of the point, as though set to spring for the sea ice or the open water, the house, with its desolate window and broken chimney, was the furthest northwest building on the continent. Uqpik was its closest neighbour.

I'd stopped here, though the backpack nagged my shoulder,  
and watched a flight of longspurs feeding.

It was midday, and a hard wind rushed across the tundra.

I was sweating and cold; my feet were swollen.

Still the outdoors held me.

To enter this soon, was too soon, so it told me.

The south wind grew violent.

It tore at the insulation on the corners which had broken  
from their seams of deep, flat 19th century nail heads,  
buckling the east side where the dogs lay tethered.

I clambered up the northwest corner.

Ox-eyed daisies, hinged to broken turfs around the house base,  
rapped my ankles. Camomile tapped, as though knocking to enter,  
the edges of my boot soles.

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<sup>7</sup> Late 19th century whaler-trader's settlement 5 miles from village

<sup>8</sup> 'Willow'.

<sup>9</sup> cliffs 35 miles south of village

*Qanitchaq! Qanitchaq!*<sup>10</sup>  
*As if no feet had ever broken through*  
*the stepped frets of the labyrinth!*

I glanced along the shed roof. There were caribou blankets  
pocked with thick eyes gnawed by warble-fly larvae;  
some gulls, half rotted, plumage withered,  
beaks and claws in pieces, lay sprawled in a bundle.  
Other remainders of game, traps, hunting tackle lodged here,  
anchored with long curving whale jaws,  
and runners, like horns, of snow-mobiles, exanimate,  
stuck through some chassis that was rusting among discs and vertebrae.

*A soul scuttled through the frieze of apparatus and detritus stored here.*  
*Torsos clamoured from the scaffold to retrace their bearings.*  
*Midday winked. The fable mended. Red-fox-and-snowy-owl.*  
*They'd been just on the trail through their sublunary offices,*  
*When the hunter – with an invitation for exchange and sociality – had*  
*detained them.*

*The fox squeezed out of his shriveled costume.*  
*He'd dressed in it only once too often.*  
*Earth had grown skinny.*  
*No more fox tracks, no more ruckus.*  
*Day ticked forward. Sun and wind rotation.*  
*The high disc shone through coat and muscle.*

*She'd been trapped in her nod, in her snow and soot plumage,*<sup>11</sup>  
*Eyes shrouded on his vertebrae,*  
*His tooth on her shoulder, her beak on his sternum,*  
*Abrasively kissing, dialectically embracing,*  
*Cross-hatched with each other,*  
*When death entertained and finally engaged them.*

I tripped the latch, my thumb sliding on the runnels  
where eighty-five years of seal-oiled fingers  
– hunters, Yankee-German traders, native wives and their 'half-breed'  
children –  
had polished and unfixed the catchment.

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<sup>10</sup> iglu entrance tunnel; frame house storm shed; traditionally locus of visionary events. <sup>11</sup> Evokes fable in which snowy owl and peregrine get speckled feathers when raven throws lamp soot at them.

It was twilight in the passage: the floor, defrosted tundra,  
caving beneath plywood panels that squelched in the mash  
and rocked from the centre as the inner door I sought emerged from the  
dullness.

The horns of my backpack scraped a high shelf where I faltered,  
wrenching the left shoulder, scapula extrapolated from its matrix  
(on a photo-plate I felt it, geometrically projected) on the screen of entry  
where I staggered to control the threshold.

Inside the room was black  
as the tarp<sup>12</sup> I heard flopping and had seen it wagging from the east side  
where the dogs slept flat-out in the grass, forget-me-nots and daisies.

The dazzle of that blazed outward to the window,  
the scarred glaze of which gave back to the grass  
and heaped lost rusting ironware: cans and barrels,  
1950s pots and skillets, a discordant, dislocated aluminium kettle,  
all the old American etceteras, accessories, disjected recent membra  
scattered, half-sunk, stuck together –  
itkaq was a verb I later gathered:

‘to throw out, or abandon on the midden’.  
Pah! I’m gonna itkaq this junk finally, I heard Suuyuk next year –

the dazzle of it rang, like brass splayed clean to brazen needles,  
a clash, screwed-up, blazing musically  
from the corners of the eyes which had dried in the wind-blast  
and now tried adjusting to the darkness and its complex odour:  
seal-oil, fuel, excrement and urine half-masked in a whiff of disinfectant.

There was a table where a pot of peanut butter  
stood with a buck-knife handle sticking out of it:  
twisted antler of the type you get from pawn shops  
down in Sioux Falls, Laramie, Billings Montana, and on Fairbanks  
2nd Avenue: masculine equipment.

Deep in the jar, the blade was set in folds of peanut butter,  
the shrouds clotted with lumps of smashed peanuts and jelly:  
while gazing from seal oil – golden, viscous,  
in an emptied can of Skipjack tuna – I caught my reflection:

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<sup>12</sup> Tar paper insulation

dust-fur on the tin's edge, spiked as the wolf-ruff  
of a parka hood, enveloping my hat and collar.

A sharp snore and the rattle of a sleeping-bag abraded my fixation.

The thrash of nylon from a recess screened with plywood burst forth,  
and a young man in an insulated boiler suit, grease-stained, ripped and puffy  
shambled from the bunk-space where he had been sleeping,  
and with mouth half-open to receive his Winston,  
eyes doubly sunk in epicanthine ruins  
– as though some clan-fate in a Kuniyoshi theatre vision<sup>13</sup> hatched his levee –  
stood and watched me levering my pack down.

‘You got everything?’ the young man asked –  
as if, in courtesy, receding from a space once his,  
in forethought he liked me without bothering to plot the detail,  
grasping that my presence, was some commerce of his seniors –  
and went back to sleep behind his partition.

‘Okay,’ I mumbled. I was irritated and embarrassed.  
I wanted the whole cabin.

I settled my stuff and, disconcerted, primly looked round  
at the textures of the house interior.  
There was gravel on the floor and table; the insulation on the walls and  
ceiling,  
webbed with soot from oil fumes, sagged dangerously inwards.  
A near-century of grease from countless animals  
hauled up and butchered in the family circle gleamed  
from every surface. Surrounding the peanut butter jar, on oilskin  
scarred by ice picks, knives and cigarette burns,  
were sugar, sardines, tuna, jars of instant coffee,  
Pream<sup>14</sup>, teabags and used teaspoons,  
cogs, brackets, bolts and wrenches, screwdrivers and brake-wire:  
the truck of subsistence: abrupt indoor leavings  
of out-of-doors business: meat, work and fuel of hunters and mechanics.  
A men's house. Uqpik's wife had died five years back,  
and I missed her for them.

Next I was drawn to a length of gingham in the north-east corner:  
a rucked, shabbily suspended, hand stained curtain,

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<sup>13</sup> 19th century woodcut artist of theatre prints.

<sup>14</sup> ‘coffee-creamer’.

from which fumes of Lysol swayed through the twilight:  
the communal sump of several days' evacuations.

Converging here, as anthropologists had warned me they might,  
were all my prudery and learn'd aversions, masked previously  
by bathroom culture, tiling, enamel and glazed sanitary polish.

One glimpse of the crusted bucket-handle, and the clusterings, blurred,  
of excrements half-melted at the loose brim of that dark infusion,  
and (impotent *in toto*, but to pitch in still quite anxious) I fled the  
house cringing.

Outside, the air was rough and simple.

I walked to the beach and gratefully relieved my lower person,  
though the wind shook my equipment, and a flurry of snow  
gusted down from the north which paralysed the sphincter.

★

A mist had come in and sunlight ran  
in shafts and pieces through it.

Then rising on the Point ahead  
was an arch of whale's jaw-bones,

two mandibles curving  
against grey, half-hidden tundra.

The bones faced one another,  
and their broad ellipse narrowed

at the high point without touching,  
but stood open, enclosing in their tension

a long framed view,  
through which, as I circled,

the village, sea and tundra,  
were rotated: the tips of the uprights

vanishing in mist as though,  
where it drifted in the sky between them,

the dead whale's vapour hung suspended:  
breathed out to the faces of past hunters and women.

At the jaws' root in the long pale grasses  
were three sets of tripods fixed waist-high:

whale ribs lashed in a ritual grouping,  
where the skin-toss game

to celebrate successful whale hunts  
was held in the spring time.

Then as I stood, I saw blow in  
the flock of whimbrel.

There were eight, perhaps ten.  
Streaked, mottled and lean-legged,

arched beaks drawing them  
from somewhere they'd been feeding,

bills airily balanced  
with the whale bone archways,

and cumbrously perched in calm  
on their migration, they lifted and fell

slowly, in exchange of places  
between jaws and tripods.

I counted again. There were eight birds –  
nine, then twelve, now eleven –

enlarged and then shrouded  
by fog in their plumage.

The wind dropped  
and I heard them whistle,

gauntly piping, one to another,  
a bleak call, but not scolding



as gulls and terns do, nor like  
kittiwakes' incessant weeping.

So they shuffled, fluttered,  
appearing to flounder,

air to whale bone,  
dropping

one, and then another,  
shuttling their pattern,

and jumping across,  
they wavered – idle slightly –

restless, in some exercise  
of voyaging or ritual,

the purpose  
of their long migration

and this point of repose here  
implicit.