

POEMS BY MOSHA FOLGER

Ancient Patience

If you look back to the North
A couple of thousand years ago
To where the Atlantic ice fields
Battle the granite shield of the Arctic coast
You'd find a man staking claim to a land
That just doesn't seem inhabitable
an Eskimo
a patient hunter who stood unmoving for hours
crouched over small bumps in the ice
subtle seal-breathing holes
Wicked winds pushing the temperature back down
from the comfort of twenty below
Facing the low sun so his shadow fell back
away from his goal
Waiting for a freezing breathe-out
to break the crystal white flatness of snow

Arm cocked, harpoon ready
eyes unblinking, blazing their own little holes
in the ice floe
Mouth closed, breath low
Because less movement, less sound
meant the night's dinner was more likely to show
Yet sometimes that hunter
stood till the moon rose
before he finally shifted, breathed hard
and set off for home with nothing but cold toes
Nothing to bloody his wife's arms to the elbows
Nothing to warm the guts of five kids
or silence the dogs' moans

Nothing but the knowledge that
the next day when he woke
to stand again over that hole
maybe, just maybe
a seal would finally show him his nose
so the harpoon could come down
to deliver its lethal blow
Or maybe, just maybe
no

It's that patience that allowed my people
to settle down and call the arctic
our home

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Summer Play

In the Arctic desert where
the earth is sand and rocks
and the lichen clings
to the frayed edges of life
in granite fields
and the wet season feels like
three days of monsoon rains

In that place patches of pavement
to a kid are
hallowed grounds
where devout children
offer their time
as sacrifice
with an endless circling of bikes
and an incessant bouncing of balls
like the pounding
and kneading
of rubber into cement
could stretch out
that holy land

How wondrous that
a tiny square of earth
can be home to so many
boundless dreams

But the reality is mostly
the sand and rocks
and gravel roads, and so
the games played adapt
games of writing
or drawing in the sand
and for one reason or another
chasing each other around

A television drawn in the dirt
with movies and shows
initialled inside
to be guessed at
D dot P dot S dot and
if someone gets it right
a frantic chase ensues
Or I Declare War
with a giant circle divided
into America and the USSR
Canada and sometimes Uganda
where the war of course
is chasing

and the fastest world leader
had dominion over all Man

And on the longest nights of daylight
baseball
Inuktitut style where groggy kids
up two days under constant sun
and stumbling
play with a rubber ball
by rules that themselves
are drowsy from the endless light
so the outfield
spans the whole town
making foul balls
as fair as any other
and the bases are run wrongwise
and whacking a runner
with the ball
is an out

Which means of course
the rest of the game is secondary
to learning how to throw
to anticipate
to picking off the right kid
in the right spot
every time

And so when a parent
with a voice that too
spans the whole town
finally calls in
one too many Expos
the real winners
aren't on the team
with the most runs
but the team that
on the quick walk home
brags about the best
outs

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Where Have All the Shaman Gone?

In the blink of an eye
we've gone from a culture where
shaman conjured spirits and
swam, fed and bred
with giant Bowhead whales
for months at a time
And people held out hope that
sometime in their life
they'd be lucky enough to witness
that rare instance
of a distant-Inuit visit
Where men from another planet descended
to collect caches of rich seal fat
overloading their space-sleds
before packing up to head back
But blink
and we wake to a world where
all of that's been reclassified filed and stacked
under the wild imaginations of
savage heathens
still unclean
cause they hadn't discovered their
one true savior and
path to heaven yet
Now elected Nunavut officials can be found
in a big hall amongst a big crowd
falling face down
wailing at the top of their lungs
praising Jesus's name
and speaking in tongues
The holy spirit come upon their earthly vessel
leaving them convulsing
Spastic believers
shaking under the giant blue and white
Israeli flag they've hung

Inuit in the day
must have been some of the easiest
lost souls to convert
A hard frozen life of
struggle pain and loss made more palatable
with the promise of a kind of
spiritual dessert
Swallow the death cold and starvation down here
and when you die
enjoy the warm salvation up there
And some of those Arctic locals
fell hard for those lies
Or promises I guess you would call them

if you fell on the other side of the line
But it couldn't have been made easy
or simplistic could it? No
First the Anglicans and Catholics
split villages and
pit kin against kin
Families feuding over which clan
would really get to go
And which side
picked the wrong guy's
rules to abide by
They've gotten over it now though
living in a kind harmony
that the rest of what we call
civilized society
should get to know

But now in the Arctic we have these
evangelical proselytizing types
whose fervor makes the Anglican and Catholic devotion
seem down right secular cause
they've got no HYPE
No souls being sucked
from bodies to on high
No chanting and dancing
with arms to the sky
No religious stakes in the continuation
of the state of Palestine
No possession
The craziest thing they've got
is a little blood into wine
Maybe a little shaman incantation
would do those folks some good
Could we at least get them a little reading
from the Koran or Talmud?
That's unlikely though
Their faith blinds them so deep
the Good News Bible's the only text
their eyes can see
We'll have to get a closet shaman
to do a little midnight chanting
see if we can't set some of those zealots free

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Leaving My Cold Self Behind

Now there will be no more falling down
unique crunching packing sound
of children who know no other way to live winter
than to tumble sideways and upside-down
from snow banks ten-feet off the ground
There will be no snow wind-blown
from parts unknown to all
but the most trained hunters
who brave the vast white fields alone
There will be no high-pitched wailing moan
of snowmobiles flying down
snow-packed gravel roads
No riders with grins plastered
Reveling in their temporary freedom from
small-town poor-me isolation syndrome
There will be no husky howls to wake me
to call me to their battle with the wind
the wind that howls back in kind
and relentless remorseless never fails to win
There will be no more dancing northern lights
chased from their nightly show
by southern skyline stage fright
There will be only the warm glow
of a cold city that states its case
with what it sees as some divine right
to throw it's gaudy remnants
high and loud into the night
There will be only nights where time is slowed
No sleep no comfort no peace
only this page this pen my words
and my message that
no matter the price sometimes
you just have to come in out of the cold

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Old Indifferences

Inuit existence was dependent partly on every member of the encampment being able to at the very least get up on their own two feet walk across the jagged tundra to follow the moving caribou so everyone could eat

So we adopted an effective means of excising inefficient limbs from the family tree that left the aged floating on ice pans and insolent sons turned away to find their own path through the cruel Arctic days

This isn't a tradition we should reprise as it slides snugly into its place in the still mostly unwritten Inuit histories but it has a related convention that's made its way down into unofficial modern Inuit custom

If you've walked downtown Montreal you've seen it and in Ottawa the spring thaw brings about the re-emergence in earnest of the panhandling Eskimos downtown between the mall and King Edward on Rideau Street

Whether these people are a nuisance isn't a question to me because I have to ask if these people are friends or family maybe a second cousin and do I have to follow protocol stop and ask a few inconsequential questions

I try to avoid having to do that by changing up my Inuk stride and remembering that from a distance I could look Thai but Inuit could never fully ostracize so when I meet one I stop say hi and try to be polite

I ask about my friend their son despite the likelihood that I was the last to see their child and it hurts inside when they ask and I have to tell them I hadn't seen their kid in a little while but that I knew he wasn't going to trial

It requires a certain distance to sit back and witness these lives with blood that courses from the same point as mine float away on slabs of concrete ice but disease strikes and existence has always insisted on a little bit of indifference