

The first of the poems in this set is Edward Field's adaptation from Knud Rasmussen; the others are Armand Schwerner's translations from Poemes Eskimo by Paul Emile Victor, Pierre Seghers, Paris, 1958.

SOME ESKIMO SONGS ABOUT PEOPLE & ANIMALS

Travel Song

Leaving the white bear behind in his realm of sea-ice
we set off for our winter hunting grounds on the inland bays.
This is the route we took:
First we made our way across dangerous Dead-man's Gulch
and then crossed High-in-the-sky Mountain.
Circling Crooked Lake
we followed the course of the river over the flatlands beyond
where the sleds sank in deep snow up to the cross slats.
It was sweaty work, I tell you,
helping the dogs.

You think I even had a small fish
or a piece of musk-ox meat to chew on?
Don't make me laugh: I didn't have a shred on me.
The journey went on and on.
It was exhausting pushing the sled along the lakes
around one island and over another,
mushing, mushing.
When we passed the island called Big Pot
we spit at it
just to do something different for a change.

Then after Stony Island
we crossed over Water Sound at the narrows,
touching on the two islands like crooked eyes
that we call, naturally, Cross-Eyed Islands,
and arrived at Seal Bay, where we camped,
and settled down to a winter season
of hunting at the breathing holes
for the delicious small blubber beasts.

Such is our life,
the life of hunters
migrating with the season.

the old man's song, about his wife

husband and wife we loved each other then
we do now
there was a time
each found the other
beautiful

but a few days ago maybe yesterday
she saw in the black lake water
a sickening face
a wracked old woman face
wrinkled full of spots

I saw it she says
that shape in the water
the spirit of the water
wrinkled and spotted

and who'd seen that face before
wrinkled, full of spots?
wasn't it me
and isn't it me now
when I look at you?

spring fjord

I was out in my kayak
I was out at sea in it
I was paddling
very gently in the fjord Ammassivik
there was ice in the water
and on the water a petrel
turned his head this way that way
didn't see me paddling
Suddenly nothing but his tail
then nothing
He plunged but not for me:
huge head upon the water
great hairy seal
giant head with giant eyes, moustache
all shining and dripping
and the seal came gently toward me
Why didn't I harpoon him?
was I sorry for him?
was it the day, the spring day, the seal
playing in the sun
like me?

a woman's song, about men

first I lowered my head
and for a start I stared at the ground
for a second I couldn't say anything
but now that they're gone
I raise my head I look straight ahead I can answer
They say I stole a man
the husband of one of my aunts
they say I took him for a husband of my own
lies
fairy tales
slander
It was him, he
lay down next to me
But they're men
which is why they lie
that's the reason
and it's my hard luck

song of the old woman

all these heads these ears these eyes
around me
how long will the ears hear me?
and those eyes how long
will they look at me?
when these ears won't hear me any more
when these eyes turn aside from my eyes
I'll eat no more raw liver with fat
and those eyes won't see me any more
and my hair my hair will have disappeared

a man's song, about his daughter

That's

your son? the brother
of your first-born boy?
That's what they say to me
well I've got some work to do again
a little better this time
if it's a boy I want
I need a sharp prick
well I'll sharpen it up and do the job again
and then if they say that I messed up
it'll be just the one time that's what