

11.

AROUND INUIT COOKFIRES
(C. lupus tundrae)

After we help with the umiaks, we hear his first notes
far away, his icicle treble playing our spinal staffs,
a different tone from the descant that follows.
The elders' eyes gleam from the depths
of their carcajou hoods. They nod to each other, stare
at the flames, and tell their visitors his story:

He was born on Denali's south slope, the headman begins,
seventh and last and smallest. Fuming at the sudden draft
fingering his rump. A writhing knot of hunger
under his mother's tongue. His deliverer
licked her sequels toward her crescent of warmth.
He affixed himself, a furry leech, to flowing life
till she shoveled him aside like a tuft of taiga moss.

His world was a vault in a rockslide. Weeks before,
earth's entrails shuddered, killing his sire, maiming
four of his mother's teats. Boulders of her new den
meshed like wolf teeth, cavities packed with silt,
sealed with lichens. From the moment he slid
onto the granite, he was Denali's chosen.

The bitch mouthed him and found him lacking. She
selected his siblings for her blessings, leaving
the runt to shiver on the fringes of backpushing feet.

His head filled with his mountain: Folds and fissures
impacted with azure, stretched to punch twin holes
in the sky, letting blues and greys pour down the eskers,
ripping sagging snow bags on their way out of the season,
or slitting thin membranes bulging with contagious fog.

He dreamed the shapes and tastes of his mountain,
felt himself running, wind singing in his ruff,
heard himself threading his howls through green needles,
saw his ubiquity rise to the timberline,
to the Dall sheep pedestals, then flash down
with the stoop of an eagle to overtake falling white.

His sovereignty was stoked with twilight-stalked prey,
even the moose was his. His tongue explored
where his fangs would be, he rehearsed his first bite
of flesh. His throat convulsed on the howl
he would throw to the moon he knew was waiting.
Waiting in the curled horn of a lame ram, waiting
on the tine of an old caribou, the winter hide of a hare.