

Around Inuit Cookfires

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He learned to move like a salmon
under the layer of rivals to steal a nipple, learned
it was more prudent to dislodge sleepers from below
than tumble off the squinny surface. And his mother
was slower to find him invested in small crevices
claiming another swallow of the dream.

He knew the dream was his only, knew he had emerged
from the cycle unsinkable as July sun. He would be
ruler of the loneliness, lord of the long dark,
honing what the mountain begot him. In time
he would join a pack, north-hearted,
moon-haired, gold-eyed as the aspens.

He would challenge the alpha male,
inhale his strength like a wisp of smoke
over lightning-bitten birch. He could feel
his victim quivering in the forceps
of his jaws, the hot blood one motion away.
He would diminish the pressure slowly,
allow the defeated to whine and drag the dirt
then sidle off to melt in stunted tundra shadows,
a shard of glacier broken off the whole.

And he, presiding legatee of Denali, would claim
the dominant female after the other members dubbed
his shoulders with loaded muzzles in tribute.
He would lead them steep, necks fletched
like arrows, eyes flashed with green aurora.
His fame would fly from black spruce spikes
to the pole; he would walk the red plush of heath
and ground dogwood, making way for the toklat grizzly
when he pleased to let the buffoon amuse him.

The dream idled while he applied each ounce of himself
swiveling his way to the lifestream. It flowed
thinner; he had to draw harder. Splinters of cold
jabbed his coat. Old habits stirred the mountain.

The last storyteller takes his turn; he rolls up
a mitten to show how small the needy sack of life
who must make his mother feel the dint of his destiny:

The she-wolf twitched in her sleep, woke
startled and pried her pup loose like a bur. Snarls
rolled round in the horn of her throat. It was she
he must master before he opened his eyes, dominated
his mates, before the hunt or the kill, the brute ice
or the trapper's tricks. Before the dream could be.

She rooted him from the pile, bore down, paused,
then snapped him up. Her breath was hard and wet;
she pivoted him on her sharp decision. Suddenly
she spat him out. Whimpering, she tried to back
from the den. Ears flat, she turned, aiming
her whiteness through the passage like a lance.