

HEART OF SPOTTED WINGS: DG NANOUK OKPIK'S MANY WAYS OF SEEING

By Katherine E. Young

dg nanouk okpik, *Corpse Whale*, University of Arizona Press, 2012,
102 pages, paper.

The past few years have seen the rise to prominence of several Native Alaskan writers, including poet Joan Naviyuk Kane, writer/storyteller Ishmael Hope, and now dg nanouk okpik. In a brief forward to *Corpse Whale*, Arthur Sze introduces okpik as Inupiat, Inuit, raised by an Irish and German family in Anchorage, Alaska. Writing in November 2012 in *The Char-Koosta News*, journalist Lailani Upham reports that okpik grew up not understanding the words of her tribal language; she eventually came to learn that her name, which had been given her by tribal elders, means “old storyteller.” According to Upham, okpik now believes she has a mission to use her writing to tell the stories of the Inupiat people. That’s a heavy load for any poet to carry. Indeed, *Corpse Whale*, okpik’s debut collection—a portion of which was featured in *Poet Lore*’s Fall/Winter 2010 issue—embodies the contradictions, the occasional false starts, the stark physical, cultural, and emotional landscapes, and the sometimes-conflicting loyalties of its author as she seeks to communicate the broader meaning of her own heritage. But okpik is up to the task. Her book is breathtaking in its ambition and often riveting in its execution.

At 102 pages of very small type, *Corpse Whale* is longer than the usual debut collection. It’s divided into 12 sections that correspond to the Inupiat aboriginal calendar of moons (and also to the standard 12-month calendar). Each of the moons is announced by a short poem describing traditional Inupiat activities of the season; for example, *Agaviksiuvika Tatqiq*, the April Moon, is: “...for beginning whaling / and finding ptarmigan.” Several of the sections contain interlocking poetic sequences, others contain poems on related themes. Some readers may find okpik’s work

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difficult; that's a pity, because this book contains marvelous poems that speak to anyone who troubles to listen. Even if you've never heard of the Inupiat people and have no inherent interest in Native Alaskan culture, you owe it to yourself to read a writer who taps into the very wellspring of poetry.

okpik's own voice is perhaps the most complex and intriguing aspect of *Corpse Whale*, a book filled with intriguing complexities. The collection's opening poem, "Siqing: Sun January," appears on the page beneath the image of a raven, a visual image that recurs throughout the book and a verbal presence in many of the poems. The poem begins:

Earth = Mother = Adopted = Blood =
Raven in the midnight sun

The poem's title and these two short lines embody several elements that distinguish okpik's writing: the use of Inupiat words; the interplay of Inupiat seasons and traditions with European conventions of time and space; the overlapping of narrative threads (often involving an explicit "she/I" formulation in the text to emphasize simultaneity of perspectives); the equating of what many non-Inupiat readers might consider separate categories of meaning ("Earth = Mother... = Raven"); the layering of adoption and heritage; and the omnipresent references to human and animal blood, often in disturbing images of cutting, tattooing, decorating, hunting, and butchering. "Ceprano Man," an early poem cycle, is set 900,000 years in the past; other poems suggest the modern-day impact of oil drilling in Alaska. Many of the poems shift between animal and human points of view, including "Addled," which describes a killing from the hunted animal's perspective. Poems such as "Imieauraq's Ceremony of the Dead" deliberately obscure whether the dead individual is human or animal (or both). okpik's voice, then, embodies not just differing or alternative points of view—it offers multiple cultural, temporal, spiritual, human, and non-human animal perspectives simultaneously in a single poem. To put it another way: although you could conceivably characterize this col-

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lection as depicting a individual's difficult journey from adopted child to grown woman rooted in Native language and culture, doing so would get you nowhere near the heart of this book.

When a writer challenges narrative and linguistic conventions as radically as okpik does, it's difficult to know where to begin assessing her work. One starting point is the poet's use of language itself, examining how well she presents words and ideas for which there are no simple English equivalents. Most Inupiat words in *Corpse Whale* are paired with English equivalents, as in the poem "*Tingivik Tatqiq: September Moon*":

Tinniks or bearberries purple
like her/my veins picked in
caribou fat.

okpik skillfully employs these Inupiat words to add sonic and emotional texture. They feel necessary and organic to the work, as in these lines from the second stanza of "*The Pact with Samna*":

She put on a carved mask with snowy owl feathers,
then, danced a long, limp, *mukluk* shuffle.

Even if you don't already know that *mukluk* means boot soles made from bearded seal, your ear can appreciate the string of "l" and short "u" sounds in "long, limp, *mukluk* shuffle." And if you do want to explore the literal meaning of the Inupiat terms, okpik has appended a self-described "loose Inuit glossary" at the end of the book. With one or two exceptions, her definitions are simple and illuminating.

More challenging for readers is okpik's insistence on incorporating multiple narrative perspectives simultaneously in her poems. Most often, this choice appears as a kind of poetic toggling between an unidentified "she" (whose persona seems to shift, depending on the poem) and a narrative "I." okpik juggles not only her pronouns but the verbs that they govern. Here's an example from the opening stanza of "*Little Brother and Serpent Samna*":

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She/I play/s in fields of tall grass and sticker bushes,
that snag on her/my *atiguluq* [dress] and white tights.

Initially, this pronoun jumble appears not only visually cluttered but exceedingly difficult to parse for meaning. And yet the larger issue here, the identification of the narrative “I” with other voices, narrators, spiritual and animal forces who are equally present in a poem through time and space—and without whom the poem could not have been conceived or written—is of profound importance to the world of this poet. I found that once I accepted the general concept of multiple simultaneous narrators, okpik’s handling of English noun-verb agreement lost its grating quality, and the music of the poems reasserted itself.

Language, of course, is only one aspect of culture, and *Corpse Whale* is explicitly concerned with culture’s various interconnected aspects, including physical and emotional landscape. Many of these poems are set in physically cold, emotionally volatile locales, including jails, cement barracks, even a musk-oil spermary. Blood, bones, whole corpses are strewn about; controlled butchery is what preserves life. In “Her/My Arctic: Corpse Whale,” okpik—who is anything but a confessional poet—comes closest to describing the search for self of the young girl who grew up ignorant of her own ancestral heritage:

It comes back to the Inuit in me:
images in the mirror are closer than they appear
on my kayak skin boat. She/I was forged by sea salt
by snow hammered into iron ore red herring.
While she’s/I’m paddling another floating corpse,
a spotted human pelt a narwhal is passing
a turquoise iceberg.

okpik knits this poem together with the refrain “She/I keep/s paddling” to chronicle a physical and spiritual journey among fragments of Coke-bottle glass and “yellowed law books” (suggestive of a European origin) and land

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and sea creatures native to Alaska, thus highlighting the speaker's experience of diverse, overlapping cultures. The poem ends as the "permafrost of sea" and land merge at the shoreline, a place where

the Inuit skeletons are rising like brittle driftwood ivory
as the Stellar Eagle plummets and she/I try/ies pushing,
pushing, and shoving the sinew back into the threaded
bones of the land.

Similarly, in "Spirit World," one of a series of astounding prose poems associated with the month of *Nuliavik Tatqiq* (October), okpik explores the identity of the narrator, whittled here to a single "I":

In realms less traveled with bowheads [whales], I will settle down to give you this tight bundle of charts and maps to find me not in unnatural shapes, but in bear grease, in your bowhead counting, along the sea, in body, in cucharist, in a seal effigy....

Here okpik blends Christianity and shamanism, the human and non-human animal worlds, all seemingly loci of the Inupiat spirit rather than distinct or conflicting realms. The poem ends with what non-Inupiat readers might call "shape shifting" (the *Okvik* were a Bering Sea people who lived from 150 BCE–700 AD):

After the border of flesh and church, after the old book is read, when ivory and scrimshaw are used with rib tools to create *Okvik* not Christianity, when the bell tones across the sound until then, I will wash ashore in a dazed whiteout, hide flesh to beach with my fore-claws hanging limply, my hooded golden eyes with concentric circles, lines on my chin, with a large backbone for my lungs, and a heart of spotted wings.

"Spirit World" and okpik's other October poems as a group constitute one of the strongest and most compelling sections in *Corpse Whale*. Here and elsewhere, she uses the prose-poem form with particular deftness, earning her tribal name of "old storyteller" in poems such as "The Flying Snow Knife," which begins:

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One day in the village, a snow-knife rose up and out the sealskin flap portal in the ceiling and flew, traveling to the top of the ice cap. It was a bright day, and it is said the sun watched the knife cutting the stars, creating half-spirits-of-light....

Aside from the prose poems, almost all of the poems in *Corpse Whale* can be classified as free verse, a fact that's not surprising for a collection whose subject matter and modes of expression are anything but formal. okpik consciously employs the conventions of visual poetry, using white space to suggest time and space (including silence and emptiness) and emotion in her line. She often scatters words across the full width of the page, as in the selections from "Her/My Arctic: Corpse Whale" cited above. In "Stereoscope," okpik uses white space to particular effect, allowing the first lines of the poem to be read from left to right, in columns, or both, thus mimicking the effect of an actual stereoscope:

Stereoscope:	A device by which two
photographs	of the same object takes
slightly	different angles are viewed
together	giving an impression of depth
slightly wide	<i>as in ordinary human vision.</i>

Elsewhere, however, her manipulation of white space within the line can seem random, even disjointed. And while it feels churlish to quibble about grammar and syntax in poems whose purpose is to broaden our experience of convention, I sometimes found myself interrogating okpik's choices to break phrases and lines in places that seemed to bear little relation to the syntactical requirements of a specific phrase or the overall purpose of the poem. What's the temporal or emotional significance of a single preposition untethered from its object or clarifying phrase?

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There are also a few moments in *Corpse Whale* when certain of okpik's choices in English feel even less familiar than Inupiat words, as in these lines from the third section of "Salt Cedar on Kokonee at Susitna River":

The nimbus darkened, a gingko fan leaf
measured candela carbon in the expanse,
Genesis at dense blithe.

Here okpik stumbles over her own astonishing gift for language while trying to achieve compression and resonance. Occasional oddities in standard English usage can also confuse readers—but these are minor issues.

Resonance—a term associated with physics, electricity, and music—offers a final perspective through which to consider okpik's achievement in *Corpse Whale*. As the examples above indicate, her poems mix what might initially seem to be discrete objects of widely varying provenance to suggest new harmonies and evoke distinctly new echoes. Here okpik transposes an oil drill into the key of nature in "If Oil Is Drilled in Bristol Bay," a poem addressed to former Alaska governor Sarah Palin:

Why is it, in Bristol Bay, a sea cormorant
hovers, sings a two-fold song with a hinged cover

for a mouth, teeth set in sockets, with a hissing grind
of spikelets biting the air? Dip one.

Other poems also juxtapose old and new, such as the modern tools of shotguns, Quonset huts, and the CB radio now used in the ancient Inupiat practice of whale hunting ("No Fishing on the Point"). In "Drying Magma Near Iliamna," a poem that observes the meeting of volcanic lava and ocean waters, okpik's vision ranges from mastodons to Christian missionaries ("men in black cloaks"), from mosquitoes to "nuclear/grasslands," from sisters "twelve thousand years young" to DNA. Because *Corpse Whale* explores realms, visions, and emotional tapestries that will be unfamiliar to most non-Inupiat readers, okpik must trade—as all poets do—in

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shared emotional resonance.

Does okpik succeed? Yes, if you let her. But these poems are not meant to be deciphered for their literal meaning, glossary in hand—that path ultimately leads to frustration. These are poems to which the canny reader will simply surrender, allowing the gorgeous language, vivid imagery, the interplay of word and white space, and the throat song of inner meaning to work their magic. As a poet who prefers to work in formal structures, I came to okpik's writing with an extraordinary degree of skepticism. But her poems, with their multiplicities and contradictions, their soaring visions and gritty realities, their collapsing perspectives and inner resonances, appeal to me as few recent books have. *Corpse Whale* is a keeper.