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## AROUND INNUIT COOKFIRES - (C. [lupus tundrarum](#))

After the hunt, we hear him again tonight,  
his icicle treble etching our spinal staffs,  
a different tone from the descant.

The elders' eyes gleam from the depths  
of their carcajou hoods. They nod and tell his tale:

He was born on Denali's south slope, the headman said,  
seventh and last and smallest, a writhing knot  
of hunger under his mother's tongue, fuming  
at the sudden draft fingering his rump. 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 knew 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, stretching to punch twin holes  
in the sky, letting blues and greys pour down the eskers,  
ripping sagging snow bags trying to move 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 calls 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.

## THE VINING TIME

She didn't mind telling her age. At least not in early summer when she looked good in blue and the backyard honeysuckle detonated round after round of perfume to fill her pores and settle in her bed pillows after dark. Enough to make her want a man around again.

But lately vines bothered her with lurking metaphor --not the cliché of helpless clinging to a hero-- most leaned on whatever was there, some grabbed everything they touched, winding it overnight. Some coiled on themselves or formed snaky gridlock in once-sunny niches, collecting webs and parasites. A few gushed out of painted planters, but soon failed at the root like her thinning, paling hair.

She'd taken to counting the hairs in her comb, and those her tweezers caught sprouting to outline her lip. And she caught herself slavishly counting clock chimes or stair steps up and down although she climbed them lightly.

Immutable laws governed the accumulation of the unwanted: Piles of papers, drawers of generic oddments, vague somatic disturbances. And the diminishing of the cherished: Old friends, neighborhood quiet and shade. Her chances of selling the house, leaving Elm Road were nil, its tall namesakes diseased, tagged, claimed one by one by whining saws shredding the peace, stumps reflecting merciless light.

Honeysuckle smothered the verbena bed in hyperbole, sagged the fence, strangled the trusting white phlox. Her orderly garden memories, times when the kitchen smelled of quail roasted with almonds, even her images of Jason's face were losing ground. And nobody would do yard work except the unaffordable landscapers listed in fancy-bordered boxes in the Yellow Pages.

She bought a magnifying mirror on a stand and a new shade of eye shadow, redefining eyes that still held the blue-violet flicker of hummingbird wings. Sometimes, feeling the sap and celebration of morning-glories at her waking, she still felt the green of promises she believed she could keep.

And sometimes-- sometimes late in summer's passing, with no steadying stake to hold to, honeysuckle trailed a funereal whiff, lacing each breath with fear.

## 1892 JOURNAL: SETTLING SOUTH OF CLOUD CHIEF

Stowed it all in the new Studebaker wagon:  
plow and Haviland china, axes and handmade quilts.  
Horse team weaned on grass, and a suckling colt.  
Sixteen head of cattle, milk cow tied to the end gate.  
Joined four more creaking, hooded mobile homes,  
trailing hooves and rooster tails of dust.  
On good days, churned up fifteen miles of gnats  
moving west to C & A Country.

Two cowboys hired on to drive the herds across  
Red River. Wagons went by barge at Byer's Crossing,  
pulled by horse and cable from the other side.

Camp nights, men watched for rustlers, Indians,  
anything that moved in prairie dark beyond  
the cookfires and smell of jackrabbit steak  
and kaffircorn bread. Seven-year-old Lucy  
in the Studebaker used to stare at stars,  
lower than in Tennessee. By day, her bonnet poked  
from her rattling canvas cocoon as she watched  
the waves in endless bluestem oceans.

Lucy told her pa their two-month calf was limping  
way behind. Sunday was a rest day so several men  
made leather boots for the bovine tenderfoot,  
feet damaged from the wagon ruts. The calf became  
a magnet for all the children on the trek.

Bought supplies at Ft. Sill; picked up  
a military escort through Kiowa country. Cattle  
inspected and dipped at the Washita County line,  
moved out, moved on, wagons jolting, squawking.  
Tires loose on weathered wood, lame horse, sick  
child, pregnant wife, sprained back, cut hand,  
case of shingles. One man's heart just quit.

On to the C & A. Lucy on to \$20 worth of land bought  
from a squatter, complete with ploughed fire guard  
defining the spread, and a dugout home in the ground  
hosting rattlers with no respect for claims.

And Lucy remembered. Hauling gyp water in barrels  
on sleds, grinding jaws on grit, cottonwood shack  
or the fine brick house she raised my mother in.  
She seasoned it all, taught school, and played  
the first church organ. Grandma, the Okie pioneer.

The Cheyenne and Arapahoe Reservation, opened to  
settlement, was called C & A Country or the C & A. Cloud  
Chief was once the county seat of "H" county, Oklahoma.

## MISSIVE FROM A KNIGHT

Afar from wintry wills and wailing gales  
of home, remembrance conjures nothing warm  
among those sleety isles but your small hand.

I crave a dreamless sleep from dusk to dawn,  
bone-weary as my mount. He carried me  
too long today, caparisoned in silk,  
his rider fully armored, armed with blazoned boasts  
to mean-eyed peasants idling by the road.

And what of noble visions? Dreams that lack  
the substance to sustain them? Faithless queen  
and bannered halls no warriors have won,  
now slowly coated in heraldic rust?

My dreams are not of Avalon but you.  
My last chimera lurks between my vow  
and you. With that, truth's champion am I.  
Yes, I will keep my oath-- but you are why.

## DON JUAN AS GOURMAND

John pored over the art book filled  
with plates of old masters, coveted each serving  
illuminated by incandescent bulbs or morningrise,  
sometimes by flashlight when he woke up hungry.  
A city friend lent him the volume, then died,  
so John decided the ripe nudes, elegant elk and boar,  
the riverine forests and cornucopias were his.  
He grew fond of the rusticating gentlemen indulging  
in medals and ruby rings. Vermeer and Breughel  
and Bosch painted for him even if dirt still limned  
his latter day Flemish face, his hardscrabble palms  
after he washed. His big overalls plodded  
between ordinary Monday meanness and Saturday humor,  
no more suspect of excess than his neighbors.  
His secret garden of delights no longer included  
flesh of women, pink clover-tipped and scented,  
fresh from Rubens or Titian. Now his most favored  
palette was blended from meats and fruits  
sweating gem-colored juices, and urns overflowing  
berries purpling blue to cerise, all multiplied  
in an opulent allegory of reds: Pome-cheeked cherubs  
basted roseate ribs flavored with grated tropics,  
aromatic roots, seeds. Venison roasted in lemon  
and honey surrounded by plump capons turning  
to earth-tone treasures over lambent coals, dripping  
amber, sometimes faintly whistling. Tablescares  
of lamb and pork in Tintoretto sauces  
posed for the tear of tooth and jeweled hand.

During each prolonged feast, he saw his fingers grow heavy with sapphires, opals, topazes, but never hesitant to plunge into saffron rice or almond and morel-filled breast cavities and sunset-hued melons. His tongue reveled in the sweet burn of peppers, hot rum, steamed crabs, his buttered icons melted in his mouth. Unnoticed was the midden, worms writhing under bone piles, shell stench, the battling flies breeding on rinds, the miasma of mold and rot. Nor did he notice, for awhile, the digital numbness from tightening gold bands, or the gray grease building up under carved prongs and smeared on the facets of his precious stones. Or the book's pages charring and curling beside his stove suddenly igniting the walls of his house.

### ELF OWL (*Micrathene whitneyi*)

The saguaros lose weight and pleat as they enter the death phase. It may last for years. It's been so long since water made good the sky's promises there's a rattle in the desert's breath not made by the sidewinder.

Leafless ocotillos dangle blips of red against day's end, one-spark blossoms on the end of long arcs like bobbing semaphores signaling the elf owl to hunt.

In midnight sandshine, the tiny raptor withdraws to its hollow in the oldest saguaro. The cactus tightens on its own tall thirst, narrowing its cells, its clustered spines hard as medieval maces guarding its deep secret moisture.

Twice more the pigmy predator haunts the night, silence feathering swiftly over empty silence, coming home empty.

## MOONWATCH, FLOODWATCH

The well still offers grit, muck and mouse taste,  
even boiled and salted. Skin-tainting,  
clothes-staining. A clod of earth wedged  
twelve feet up in the oak tree grows clover.

Your being gone is everywhere. Thinking  
makes a sibilant sound. Mold's graffiti marks  
the walls: Old obscenities under new paint,  
that smell forever in my head.

Just when I thought euphemisms might work,  
the moon floated up, sloshed  
in the cattle cistern, shafted through a window  
to spiral down the drain with the dishwater.  
Look at it now. A pale wet omen for a halo,  
a sickly eye watching in collusion  
with hungry streams lumbering below.

Grayish, khaki green in sunlight, water  
pretends to mind its own business.  
Wide, profound river business. Secretly  
gnawing rock, smuggling topsoil like contraband.

Indispensable, indifferent as air, the river  
has age, history, often ignoble, beauty I deny.  
Rehearsed fear runs deep in my own dark bed.  
My banks overflow with muddy deposits.

Tonight's moon is sludged. Hurrying, it rises  
above the current tugging on its south, summons  
a thunderhead to cover its retreat. Slow rain  
begins, bleeding the clay, red-veining the shore.

Our warped doors have been replaced. And you  
who can't be, sometimes inhabit poems. Sometimes  
you whisper riverine words I can't translate  
as you trace that slimy signature on the bricks,  
receipt for surrender of all your premises.

Hearing the river louder than thought, its noise  
rumples my mind, ripples over and into me  
like a sudden chill; sometimes it wrinkles  
me inside like outdated memos wadded in a fist.

Water as simile is hard to shut off.

## KITCHEN UNDERCURRENT

Time-savers, gadgets, wired shortcuts,  
The plug-in help I've got  
Will never change a kitchen klutz--  
A cordon bleu I'm not.

Electric knives to slice and peel,  
Hot prongs to poach tomatoes,  
A probe to pinch and punch and feel,  
A mace to smash potatoes.

Machines to string out noodle dough,  
Twin mauls for crushing beans.  
The oven beeps to let me know  
It's lethal while it cleans.

An automatic coffee urn  
Extracts exotic brew.  
The range can sense impending burn,  
Won't overcook the stew.

Robotic tongs both grasp and lift,  
The Smart-Pots skim and baste.  
Computers measure, mix and sift;  
I'll bet they even taste.  
My kitchen's armed, a battle zone

And I'm the casualty.  
I long to own a Super clone  
With no more need for me!

## CHESAPEAKE GULLS

Some fly from cliffs where rocks and limbs are patched  
With ice and snow-- to sueded cypress knees  
Where shade-striped quietude is laced and thatched  
With sun-bleached moss festooned from wading trees.  
For weeks gulls ply deep sea, its folding foam  
Uncertain as the earthbound ways of men.  
But once the birds have claimed a bayside home,  
They troll tidepools and settle down again.  
Some plumb the estuaries' tepid sheen  
Or dive where sequin-flashing smelt appear  
In silver schools against the depths of green.  
Some hang around to steal fish from the weir.  
White wings pursue all boats. And gulls in flocks  
Of dark-eyed patience spend their days on docks.

## YEAR-END DIARY, SEASIDE

I follow the sunrise sheen  
on the shore's moist pages,  
reading yesterday's last memos  
on morning's damp margins.

December dictated an epic  
in indellible tidal calligraphy.  
As I turn inward, the sand muses  
over brown beach grass pressed  
between chapters, a synopsis  
of-the past, versed  
in fading rhymes.

Like a P.S to the final entry  
of chilling details,  
one flurry of leaves  
dares to sign off  
with a flaming flourish of red.

## CHALLENGE FOR A SCIENTIST

In a time men call the beginning  
there was unbridled light,  
too pure, too intense for any  
but God's eyes. A time of mass and matter,  
warring and waiting-- His playthings--  
molded and willed and flung  
from dawn to forever.

And now as you pry with derived light,  
accelerate particles of eons,  
break creation's codes,  
you describe how earth and life happened.

Knowing at last it was no accident,  
help us learn together life's WHY.  
Equip us to receive signals of truth,  
train us to transmit the whole.  
Locate the lost language of holiness,  
discover synonyms for praise. Give us  
new words, wrested from granite,  
born burning, tempered on glaciers,  
cut and polished with diamonds.

To be spoken by men in whispers.

## MOTHER/DAUGHTER BANQUET

For the main course  
let her remember the days I clung to her  
while she shielded me from dragons:  
A nasty neighbor who thought  
I broke his porch light. A snarling Doberman  
chasing me till she ran between us with a stick.  
So many dragons, some inanimate, all vanquished.

She knows they still lurk out there,  
multiplying by dark, roaming offices  
and freeways. More kinds than she knows.  
Sometimes the fiercest of all is the one  
inside me uncoiling to attack her hands.

What makes daughters' knives so sharp?  
Why must mothers rearrange your cupboard?  
Rattling glass jars as you juggle your budget,  
blowing dust off dishes as you dress for a party.  
Reinfecting that ancient cut.

Last year she gave up running in marathons  
and riding fast horses,  
but she still searches my premises for dragons.  
I mention her magnificence  
with the long-ago Doberman. She says  
She doesn't remember that at all. She sniffs  
at my servings designed for her plate. We stare  
at the family silverware, dab at silences  
with monogrammed napkins. We clear the dining room,  
cram leftovers in odd places,  
punish each other with after-dinner love.

Somehow this movable feast has made us strong.  
The armatures beneath are not straight but sturdy.  
The long table is scratched but failsafe.

And without her I would be hungry.

## Mother/Daughter Banquet

The silver is an old pattern. We dab  
at small silences with linen napkins.  
Let her remember the days I clung to her  
while she protected me from dragons:  
A neighbor who cut a switch when he thought  
I broke his coach light. Vicious pavement  
when I learned to skate. A snarling Doberman  
chasing me till she ran between us  
and drove it off. So many dragons vanquished.

She knows they still lurk out there,  
waiting in cars, multiplying by dark,  
foraging in offices, condos, freeways.  
More kinds than even she knows. Sometimes  
the fiercest of all is the one inside me  
uncoiling to attack her hands.

What makes daughters so razorish?  
Why must mothers keep the crumpled giftwrap?  
Rattling it as you juggle your budget,  
blowing dust off of it as you dress for a party.  
Reinfecting that ancient cut.

Last year she gave up running in marathons,  
riding in steeplechases, but she still searches  
my doorstep for dragons. I mention her magnificence  
with the long-ago Doberman. She says  
she doesn't remember that at all. She sniffs  
at my servings designed for her plate. We clear  
the dining room, cram leftovers in odd places,  
punish each other with after-dinner love.

Yet I'm still learning things I don't understand.  
This movable feast has made us strong.  
The armatures within are parallel, sturdy as maple.  
The table we share is failsafe.

And without her I would be hungry.

## TRACKING DOWN THE HORSE CONNECTION

My old humpbacked scrapbook contains a picture of my great grandfather with his foot propped on a fat cylindrical object to which his horse is tied. For years I wanted one of those objects. I'd never seen the real thing until something similar caught my eye propping open a shop door--one of those emanating pungent incense, Bar Harbor Yankee accents and dollar signs. The shopkeeper didn't know what it was, didn't want to sell it because it was good at what it was doing, and unless I was interested in his regular wares-- nose rings and African fertility beads-- that was that.

My lack of a lexicon of terminology compounded the problem. My mother called the item "A sort of portable hitching post." She was on the cusp of a vanishing era. The family owned a car but her father loved his rig and his old red gelding. He took her for buggy rides on Sundays and they stopped beside fields of Tennessee primroses and hunted for arrowheads after securing the horse to the above. By then, hitching rails had disappeared. But even before, people must have wanted to park where there wasn't even a tree. Ergo, the take-along hitch was invented.

My great uncle irreverently called it a nag iron. His oldest brother had one from his U. S. Cavalry days which he appropriated to anchor his fishing boat. That one probably lurked rustily in some backwater bass pond.

In Wisconsin, I learned to call it a halter stone and in Illinois, a tether weight. My vocabulary was increasing if my collection was not. "Used to come in different sizes and shapes," one old timer said fondly. "Weighed anywhere from 15 to 50 pounds depending on what kind of horse you had. One for a team could go to 60."

My vacations took on the aspects of a Maltese Falcon hunt. If many prizes were left after the war-time scrap drives, they were likely cankered to crumbs or masquerading as something else. My treasure fad not acquired enough haute to merit the attention of antique dealers at the time, so I took my search to the grass-roots.

My first find was decidedly traumatic. Pursuing a lukewarm lead on an unimproved road, I finally found the mail box with the name I'd been given. After much supplemental hand fluttering, a few "you know"s and a spate of similes, the woman at the fence nodded and opened the gate. She had me drive down the parallel bald stripes through the weeds that led to a listing barn. Daylight refused to follow us inside and the floor was strewn with hay among other things. The drama began with my anguished yowl. I lifted my foot gracelessly, clutching my ankle. "Looks like you found it," the woman cackled. In that moment I learned the meaning of "exquisite" pain, a bit of semantics I always thought was affectation. For certain, the immovable object with which my major toes collided was a tether weight, not unlike my great grandfather's. In raised numerals, it proudly announced its weight at 35 pounds. Instead of a large ring at the top it had a bar across a deep depression. "We used it to keep a warped floorboard down," the woman

was saying. "Didn't know if it was still around."

My left foot still emanated shock waves as I dragged it back to my car. My right arm terminated in a weighty iron appendage and my purse was \$25 lighter. It was not until my toes settled into a dull ache back on the highway that I realized I should have done a little bargaining. She had undoubtedly fallen over it a few times herself. Still, it would have been hard to project "I don't really care about this thing but I might take it off your hands" with a dust-swathed car, wind-wrecked hair, sweaty upper lip and hose sprouting little runs. My cool needed polish. After all, this was my first completed mission. I now owned an honest-to-Zeus horsekeeper. That's what she called it, a horsekeeper.

My next promising lead came from my family. "You know your Uncle Matt's wife always did keep a house full of oddments," my Aunt Helen nodded. "Anybody who'd keep her appendix in a bottle in the bathroom cabinet would keep anything."

We drove to the old place with Uncle Matt's son who said, "You're just in time. Some Bohemian-type artists want to buy the house. It's so far out in the sticks nobody else wants it. Course, people have been cartin' off Momma's stuff for years. What's that thing you're after again?" He looked just as blank after I'd answered for the third time.

The search was fruitless. We began to cough and sneeze from attic dust and cellar mold. As we started for the car an uncontrollable urge swerved my steps. Quickly I opened the bathroom cabinet and there in the dimness was an unspeakable object lurking in murky liquid in a mayonaise jar. Collectitis is a sickness. Had she hoped to add a companion piece or two?

For sheer singleness of mind, nothing surpasses a devout collector homing in on what he or she wants to collect. That day I passed up a chanticleer weathervane, five lightning rods, a hideous ceramic frog that turned out to be Zsolnay pottery and several commemorative plates-- the values of which I learned when everything was auctioned.

But I didn't leave empty handed. Going back down the gravelly incline, I saw something atop the roof of what had been a woodshed. Whatever the failings and frailties of my ilk, we have one mega-sense that operates on invisible antennae. My tunnel vision had spotted the brass ring. We hauled it down from its long ago assignment of holding the corrugated roof in place, a task shared with number of concrete blocks. We knocked one off and it grazed my shoulder. Because of my heavy jacket, the bruise went away in ten days.

On closer inspection, the find was odd looking. The heft was right and the corroded ring to which a length of chain was setined but-- It was crusty with cement particles and dirt. There appeared to be metal ribs on the sides and a rounded overhanging top. No numerals declared the poundage, no initials denoted the foundry.

"My cousin began laughing. "You know what that is?"

"I believe it's a horse hitch," I said defiantly, rubbing my shoulder.

"Could be that's why they beefed it up, but that's an old lantern." I stared at it. We scraped the sides with a stick. Once announced, it wouldn't go away. It was indeed a lantern. Filled with cement. Later, a museum curator would agree that it was also used as a hitching weight. There was a smidgen of leather strap at the end of the chain. "People Rube Goldburged things in those days, too." he said.

The museum had a couple of proper cast iron hitching weights displayed with a phaeton and a kindling wagon. They were gorgeous. The plastic horse was fastened by a strap from the headstall, not by the bridle as my grandfather had casually done in the photo. Like everyone else, the curator didn't know of any books on the subject but he presented me with a photocopy of a Readers Digest essay about horse anchors by H. Allen Smith.

Humorist Smith wrote about his search, not for the stay weights themselves but for the colloquialisms they were dubbed with. He compiled a list--all new to me. I adored ground-frog, dead man and hard hobble.

From then on, I armed myself with his article when I went looking. The written word always gives one a wrinkle of respectability which I sorely needed. There's something pitiable and a little flaky about a five-foot female rummaging around in barns and storage areas for something most folks never heard of-- and she isn't sure what to call it.

My second true hitching iron (complete with instructions that it was called a head brake) was an outright gift from someone who was impressed that I, too, read H. Allen Smith. I pressed on to my next lead in positive euphoria.

There was indeed a head brake at the end of my latest directions-- although a worse misnomer there never was. In a cow stall, my quarry was serving as part of a device for keeping a feisty heifer from offending the milker (a fellow, not a machine) with her tail. Obviously, the item was held in low regard. Aha! I shouted inside my head. A chance to drive a real bargain. I offered \$5. Congratulating myself that the wisdom of my choice of collectibles was becoming apparent, that it was worthy of my talents and suited to my purse, I smiled benevolently. Dimly I recognized that it also satisfied a latent snob spot present in all collectors: It was not something everyone else had tons of, and it held primal appeal to the basic hoarder instinct. I was on the ground floor in a position to corner the market while my luck was hot. Aha! continued to ricochet in my brain until I noticed that the owner had not replied.

"Tryin' t'think what I'd replace it with," he said at Vase, "Miss Grindle likes to dust m'face."

"But surely you can find something that would work as well so you can make a few bucks. What about a big rock?" I said sweetly.

"Oh--not really worth it t'look for one just so-- tie it up just right so it won't slip lose when she takes a notion t'swish me. Guess I'm just as attached to it as she is," he chortled, raising his brows to question whether I grasped his cleverness. "It's called a curb block, y'know."

By the time I was up to \$18 my voice had a distinct whine. Rule #1--Never let the seller know you can't live without what he's got--was once again in disarray. I could feel my eyes glittering with desire and determination. As I paid the \$27.50, I vowed to heed the old Chinese proverb: Wear very dark glasses when gazing at goods you wish to purchase.

It was still early and it was only 30 miles to the next town. I'd long had a visceral feeling that area held something for me. The local historical society had been less successful than H. Allen Smith on name calling but they had some thoughts on places where residue of past lifestyles might still be extant. An awful lot of horse anchors became boat anchors and that area was both horsy and boaty. Someone should have a nostalgia boutique called Equine-Marine.

Actually. it was a junk yard. All the crass and rumped moltings of civilization, all that unwallled daylight set my teeth on edge. If I'd found antique shops depressing with recycled dust and drear, this was worse. "Um, would you have anything that would make a good door stop?"

I followed the motion of a lanky arm through the bristling debris. The man rounded a turn and pointed to a pair of horse anchors. It happened so fast it was hard to stop the gasp. He wanted \$3 apiece. Dizzily I fumbled in my wallet. Such moments beg to be shared. In my expansiveness I blurted, "Do you know what they are?"

"Looks like iron to me," he said.

"Yes, but they were designed for hethering torses," I gushed. "I mean--"

"Whatever turns you on, lady," he shrugged. He would have been called an impudent young whelp in the heyday of my collectibles. He didn't even offer to put them in my car, just walked off stuffing my money in his shirt. I wonder if he even worked there. \_

A few antique dealers know about tether weights now-- at \$40 minimum. One cutesy hotshot recently called them horse pots. "Why pots?" I said indignantly. "They couldn't hold anything."

"Sure they could," he said. "They held the horses."

H. Allen would have tched.