

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.

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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.

She was gone so long two pups died. The mountain
groaned, small spasms radiated through its gizzard.
The throb inside the apprentice legend wavered.
He attached his will to the stone.

At last she came back with an offering for him only,
his first meat, fuel for his fury.
He had won. He had made her taste the dream.

The old storytellers smile at our attentiveness.
A single wolf calls high beyond the fire fangs.
We count the cold-bladed answers rising whitely.