

## **Kuskokwim, *for JM***

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The last afternoon we spent together was at her fish camp on the Kuskokwim. We loaded in, the four of us, to her neatly parked spot at the harbor. I took a picture of the row of boats in the water, alongside a row of fence posts, alongside a row of trucks. I wanted to capture that isolated moment where things had a place in the muddy upheaval of our tundra town. A broken-down boat sat in the sand blocking my own room's view: shattered window shambles of graffiti. Mine was an outlook of crumbling dwellings struggling against each other, struggling against existence. The permafrost vomited foundations leaving homes tottering on wooden legs like the nineteenth century soldiers they were, unsighted to their defeat. I scrubbed the glass, but everything stayed sepia.

The rust-tinged water that ran from our tap seemed to be leaking.

But, then, there was fish camp. When I think about that afternoon I remember how colorful everything was. Suddenly. The sky was Midwestern blue. The riverbanks were bright green. The tundra gave birth to tiny white flowers. I can still feel the surprising nip of the water as it ripped by. Summers in Alaska were cool, but on the Kuskokwim even my sweatshirt wasn't enough. She let me borrow a jacket she'd brought along, like everything there a hand-me-over from someone she knew. It was too big for me, a

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familiar comfort like wearing my dad's on the farm. We passed the barge graveyard and wordlessly paid homage to the sunken heroes of our fight.

She put on earmuffs to drown the dog-tired engine and shouted at me through the muffle: placenames in a language I couldn't pronounce. I stammered to answer the phone at the small museum where we worked. *Yupiit Piciryarait*. They weren't my words. When I hung up she would tease me. She loved to tease me. She left fish heads in my office after she finished eating them because of the face I made. She wrinkled her cheeks and laughed a deep rumble as I gagged at the smell. In National Geographic she was the stink head chef.

She strung the long rows of salmon under the blue tarp roof. Together she and her husband built a drying rack out of tree branches. My roommate and I carried hungered boards draped with roe slowly, together. It felt like a game I would have played as a child. We set the boards carefully, balanced on irregular notches in the branches, just as my brother and I did building forts in the woods. Only we never knew salmon where I grew up. Catfish, bluegills, those were the fish of my mud-bottomed waters. Salmon was a luxury in the city on candlelit tables with Sauvignon Blanc.

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That was before I knew her. No plate drizzled with white or yellow sauce had ever born a color like the flesh she used her ulu to carve. Unborn spawn dripped and glimmered. The pink of my past paled in comparison to the blood rust she expertly, quickly sliced. Vermillion in the smoke.

In Cup'ik she was *Pirciralria*. She was Cup'ik; she was that place. In Cup'ik I was *Kass'aq*. I was an outsider; that place was her. With time like the tundra she took me in, prickly and beautiful and full of places to stumble if I wasn't careful. I tried to be careful and I loved her.

In spite of her warmth, she invited very few people to her home. In spite of her celebrity, very few people really knew her. When the salmon ran, she disappeared to fish camp. She told me that she rarely invited outsiders to fish camp. She told me that and then she invited me to go with her. The honor enveloped me like her net. When the salmon ran, I emerged.

Like her, I studied anthropology. Like her, I traveled. Like her, I believed in the importance of our words, of our sense of place. With her, I mended my broken self. My pale skin stained lighter by tears, encircled with a red ring where I had pressed the phone to my cheek, she found me huddled. She put her hand on the ring, on my cheek. In English she renamed herself and told me to listen. My JM spoke words in a language

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I desperately wanted to pronounce. With her, I fell in love. She said he had a beautiful voice. She said the most important thing is the voice.

The voice is life's pronunciation.

Fish camp was the voice of ten thousand years. I watched her work and saw the exhibits at our museum come to life. If I squinted, I could ignore the small differences: jeans, sunglasses, cans of pop, my blond hair. Through the haze of the smokehouse I saw her ancestors. *Mamterillermiut*. I strained to listen and heard the eternity of the river. The clear water sparkled and the view was the past and the future woven together. I felt overwhelmed by how small she was, how precious, how strong. I wanted to hug her. I wish I had. Instead I walked to the bank and looked across to the shore on the other side. Only the present is real.

In the trees behind her fish camp we discovered the tireless cab of a truck, its windowless face the same oxidized metal as the barges in their watery graves. We got in and I sat next to my roommate. She lit a cigarette as she pretended to drive. I pretended to share it with her and blew curls of white through an unknown past discarded. Smoke empty of my breath wasn't my voice. Corroded flakes quivered on the dashboard like tarnished scales. At fish camp she used every part of the salmon.

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Nothing could be buried there.

I always thought I would see her again. In her last sentence to me she asked when I would make her a grandmother. I had just mailed her a card to tell her when I saw the news. When I think about the afternoon they said she died I remember how colorful everything was. Always. My Midwestern sky was blue. Her Oregon riverbanks were bright green. She died looking across a different river to the shore on the other side. I cried because she wasn't on the Kuskokwim. I cried because she never knew I was pregnant. I cried because I never said goodbye, because I was the one who left.

My daughter speaks a language I can't pronounce. She runs across the summer's yard with her arms straight behind her. The way she plunges through the air she looks like a salmon. I am an outsider to the depth in her gaze, but it's a familiar place. She is only nineteen months old, but she teases me. She loves to tease me. I put tiny white flowers in her hair and I am overwhelmed by how small she is, how precious, how strong. Like her, my daughter wrinkles her cheeks and laughs a deep rumble. This morning I cried because my daughter reminds me of her, because my daughter will never know her. My daughter put her hand on my cheek and for an isolated moment the past and future were woven together. It was her hand.

Everything has a place.