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The Crooning Wind: Three Greenlandic Poets



Synopsis

Three mysterious Greenlandic poets are translated for the first time into English by David R. Slavitt--a poet and novelist as well as a prodigious translator of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, and Sanskrit--and Nive Grønkvist, a native Greenlander named "Greenland's connection to the Anglophone world" by Ekstra Bladet.

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Customer Reviews

I ordered this collection of Greenlandic poetry literally by mistake. When it arrived, I had no idea how or why it came in the mail. But I loved it. Greenlandic poetry: ice, snow, sunlight, darkness, heat, cold, caribou, seals, bears, mysticism, legends, and gods. Very direct language on the edge of survival, and a great translation. I'm recommending this to all of my friends. Tom Lombardo
Poetry Series Editor
Press 53

Gaining an appreciation for life in Greenland doesn't require a voyage to remote and sparsely populated cities such as Nuuk, Qaqortoq, Savissivik or Qaanaaq. Surprisingly, the poems in the collection "The Crooning Wind" allow distant, and likely much warmer, readers to imagine the searing winds, the dangers of walking on frozen water and the rhythms of existence in mostly frozen Kalaallit Nunaat. These short poems tell poignant and sometimes riveting stories as they evoke a life unimaginable to many. Expectations invert immediately in the poems of Torklik Máfárh, whose biography ends ominously with "he disappeared into a crevasse in 1940." "Ice" explores the inner fire within ice and reflects on its "blue flame," likening extreme heat to extreme cold and meeting "in

a love much like hatred." Two fascinating parallel poems, "Darkness" and "Light," explore the agony of days without night, when people yearn again for darkness following endless light, which becomes the agony of nights without days when people yearn again for light. Polar extremes. Other poems deal with eating poisonous sharks, snowmen in America compared with snowmen in Greenland, calls to the air-spirit for seal blubber, a motorboat challenged Dane, and how no sound isn't music. One poem, "Plans," seems somewhat anachronistic, with its references to malls, food courts and tanning salons, especially considering the poet died in 1940. The second poet, Gerda Hvisterdahl (1916-1994), explores similar themes. In "Where" a hunter knows his prey continually scatters out of reach in the "metaphysical whiteness." He imagines them laughing at his hungry, futile chase. "Spearmen" derides modern hunters with modern weapons and expresses the hope of old hunters for the spirits to "make it right" by arming the animals to "thin the herd of men." "Wake" probably ranks as the most erotic poem in the collection, with its watery suggestive imagery of "giving way" and "caressing the keel." "Insult Poem" remains hilariously self-explanatory. Innunuaq Larsen (1935-2002), the third and final poet in this collection, incorporates Greenlandic spirituality even more than the previous poets. "Stone Knife" honors the stones who waited for millennia to become fashioned into knives through violent flinting. They will take revenge for this pain on the flesh they eventually pierce. "Hell" laughs at the missionaries who presented the idea of fire as punishment to Greenlanders living in penetrating cold: "Hey! Not so bad!" "I could stand that!" In respect, they "didn't giggle" and hid their smiles. They know that hell, if it exists, would be either cold or full of mosquitoes. "Four Questions" reflects on the workings of heavenly bodies, women's thoughts and the prevalence of lice. "Going Into The Interior" talks of extreme shame or sickness that leads people to simply walk towards the mountains and to certain death but with the possibility of transforming into a spirit. "Argument for the Defense" provides a perfect companion to Hvisterdahl's "Insult Poem." "Why The Arctic Hare Has Short Ears" relates the return of a good deed to the shaman ÁfÁ orkell from a long-eared hare. Problem solved. The intense "Glacier" evokes the fear of walking across frozen water: every step involves the risk breaking through the ice, but stopping risks freezing to death, the walker thus remains "balanced between two terrors." "History," the book's final poem, speaks of the temporary nature of humanity, which, according to the poem's end, also applies to "the proud empires far to the south." This small collection remains so good throughout that many readers may want more. But even a quick internet search, in English at least, returns no information on the individual poets, their books or their poems. Other collections of Inuit and Greenlandic poems exist (many are out of print and use the now dated term "Eskimo"), which may provide opportunities for further work to explore. Perhaps these works only exist in Greenlandic

editions? But, even if one were to take up the daunting task of learning Greenlandic, an online search of the Atuagkat bookstore in Nuuk, the largest bookstore in Greenland, turns up nothing. Maybe someone with a thorough knowledge of Danish could summon these poets and books from a search engine? This exercise leads to the undeniable conclusion that the poets featured in "The Crooning Wind," though venerated in their homeland, remain incredibly obscure in the English-speaking world. This makes this small book all the more valuable. If more Greenlandic poetry of this caliber exists, and it doubtlessly does, hopefully more excellent translations and collections such as this one will appear.

For Americans, Greenland is both nearby and exotic. Nearby not just physically, halfway between Europe and North America, but nearby historically; it was settled, albeit briefly, by the Scandinavians, who also settled (even more briefly) a small part of North America: "Who else has such a history? People came, Desperate they must have been, or driven by madness, And lived here and died out. The Saqqaqs came, Declined, and disappeared. And the next and the next. But the truth reasserted itself, and then there were gaps, Centuries long, when no one was here. And the island Queened it with only the bears and the caribou And the birds calling out their proud and derisive cries. A Greenlander has to acknowledge this and admit Modestly, that we are only temporary. But then, in those proud empires to the South, They are guests too, no different from us." I take "Saqqaqs" to be the Scandinavians.* By "proud empires in the South", poet Innunnguaq Larsen clearly means us. At the same time, this former colony of Denmark is exotic, because nothing can be more exotic than the indigenous cultures that the weed cultures, European, Han, or Arab, have destroyed or debilitated. These people speak, or spoke, a form of Inuit, the same language family spoken in the northern reaches of North America, and the Greenlanders came from the American main, a long time ago. As exotic and near-by as the Cherokee, the Aztecs, the Sioux. In any event, of the three poets presented here, only Gerda Hvisterdahl was still living at the time of publishing. Torkirk Moersch died in 1940, Innunnguaq Larsen in 2002 after a long and incapacitating depression. All three talk very consciously of Greenland in the poems printed here, though never in the polemical way sometimes found in those parts of the world colonized by Europe. The natural world, prior to civilization and politics, is still the best grounding for our consciousness, and this book, published so recently as 2012, would seem to be evidence. All three poets write principally about being from and of Greenland, spectators of Greenland, part of Greenland. As the brief biographical note on Moersch says, "he disappeared into a crevasse". Reading his poems, you imagine this was the best way to go. How many Americans would meet their best death disappearing into the desert

or a forest, or carried away by the Mississippi? (I had in mind Euro-Americans. For that matter, how many Native Americans?) As in many cultures not yet far from their origins, not only nature, but folklore is not far in the distance here. Gerda Hvisterdahl: Loon
A clear night in winter and the sky
Was so cold that it was all the stars could do
To hold their places and twinkle to try to keep warm.
One little star, far to the north, in despair
And fear, lost hope, lost light and height, and fell
To the earth where it lay near death. But a loon found it,
And it called to the others with that strange tremolo cry
That startled the stunned star. Then the loons ascended
In the slow clumsiness of their kind that requires much effort
But gets them at last aloft. If the bird could do it,
The star resolved to try again, and succeeded.
And the loons called out, as if it were one of them.
Occasionally, the world off becomes visible. Thorkil Moerch: Plans
A mall! With fountains, palm trees, music of course,
And Chinese food and pizza in the food court,
Shops that feature sun-glasses, running shoes,
Greeting cards, tee shirts, and fountain pens.
A tanning salon. Why not? And foot massages.
All the things Nuuk doesn't have. I see it, its dancing neon signs light up the sky
In the winter night and beckon, offering people
The brighter tomorrow Greenlanders deserve. [Nuuk was Moerch's birthplace.] But more typical of the collection of Moerch and the collection generally: Ice
In the heart of the ice is fire. You can touch it, feel it,
And sometimes, in the right light
See the blue flame at its heart,
Unbearable heat and unbearable cold
Married, as the moon and the sun are married
Together in a love this is much like hatred.
We'll always have these things, perhaps even the ice, in a few places, occasionally.
One would like more. There is a tradition that books of contemporary poetry should be short (this one is 75 pages), just as pointless, it seems to me, as the tradition that non-fiction should be 300 pages or more. Twice as much from each poet would have been welcome. Also, some more information on each of the three poets would have been in order, perhaps a general introduction. We're told that Innunnguaq Larsen composed only in Greenlandic; Moerch is identified ambiguously as a "pioneer in Greenlandic poetry", and there's no clue about Gerda Hvisterdahl's literary language. Moreover, some of the poems could have done with notes. E.g. I wondered whether the poem by Hvisterdahl about the star and the loons had some sort of folkloric antecedent. I would have liked to have known where all that stuff about malls came from; perhaps Moerch had visited New York and had an ugly vision of tanning salons and the rest, giving the translator some legitimate grounds for the anachronisms. I would have liked to have seen a note about what was meant by Saqqaq. Perhaps I'm supposed to Google it, but, believe it or not, I wasn't sitting by a computer. A search of the OCLC library database for these poets only yielded this one book. David Slavitt is a prolific translator, scholar and novelist. I was unable to find anything else by Nive Groenckjaer. *Not so. After finding that computers had not in fact vanished from the Earth, I

resorted to Wikipedia and found that the Saqqaq were a very ancient culture, possibly having arrived in Greenland as long as 5500 years ago, and perhaps had no connection, genetically or otherwise, to anyone there now. Somewhat the resonance of the Anasazi in the American Southwest, at least in poetic terms. Nonetheless, I think I got the point right, and I think it illustrates my own point about the need for notes. I might be so fortunate as not to have a computer on hand, and the time may come when there are no computers, but a copy of this book as survived, somehow.

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