

foreword

dg nanouk okpik is Inupiaq, Inuit, and was raised by an Irish and German family in Anchorage, Alaska. Her family had ocean-faring boats, and, growing up, she fished in many rivers, lakes, and seaports. As a poet, dg okpik draws on her Inupiat heritage, but she is firmly rooted in the complexities, tensions, and challenges of our contemporary world.

In okpik's poetry, we often discover we are experiencing the world through contrasting mythic elements—"This day is made of horned puffins and Eskimo soothsayers"—and our experience of time moves from linear to synchronous. Past, future, and present co-exist, and this underlying conception of time strengthens the mythical elements in her work. The speaker of her poems is frequently locating and orienting: "marking the direction south / on a walrus hide of light-shadow as if for / a fossil record."

The idea of a poem as a "fossil record" is an intriguing one, but mere retrieval from the past is insufficient to fulfill the visionary quest of the speaker. The speaker searches for something ancient yet contemporary, to find, in Wallace Stevens's words, "what will suffice." Here the words "as if" qualify the possibility of a poem as a fossil record: the poem may resemble a fossil record, but, instead of merely recording, the poem enacts a record of consciousness that leads to revelation. In section 3 of her marvelous sequence, "For the Spirits-Who-Have-Not-Yet-Rounded-the-Bend," the poem enacts, through memory, a vision of salmon moving upstream in cosmological light:

I remember cleaning smeared smelt off my hooks sharpening them to catch
mirror-back salmon, its fins spread, heading the opposite way, nosing up the
river to spawn in eclipse water when the sun moves around the earth and all
days are ebony backward.

dg okpik is always in pursuit of origins, but she writes an earth-centered poetry with urgency and with a flair for conflating the natural world with the mythic world of creation.

—ARTHUR SZE

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