

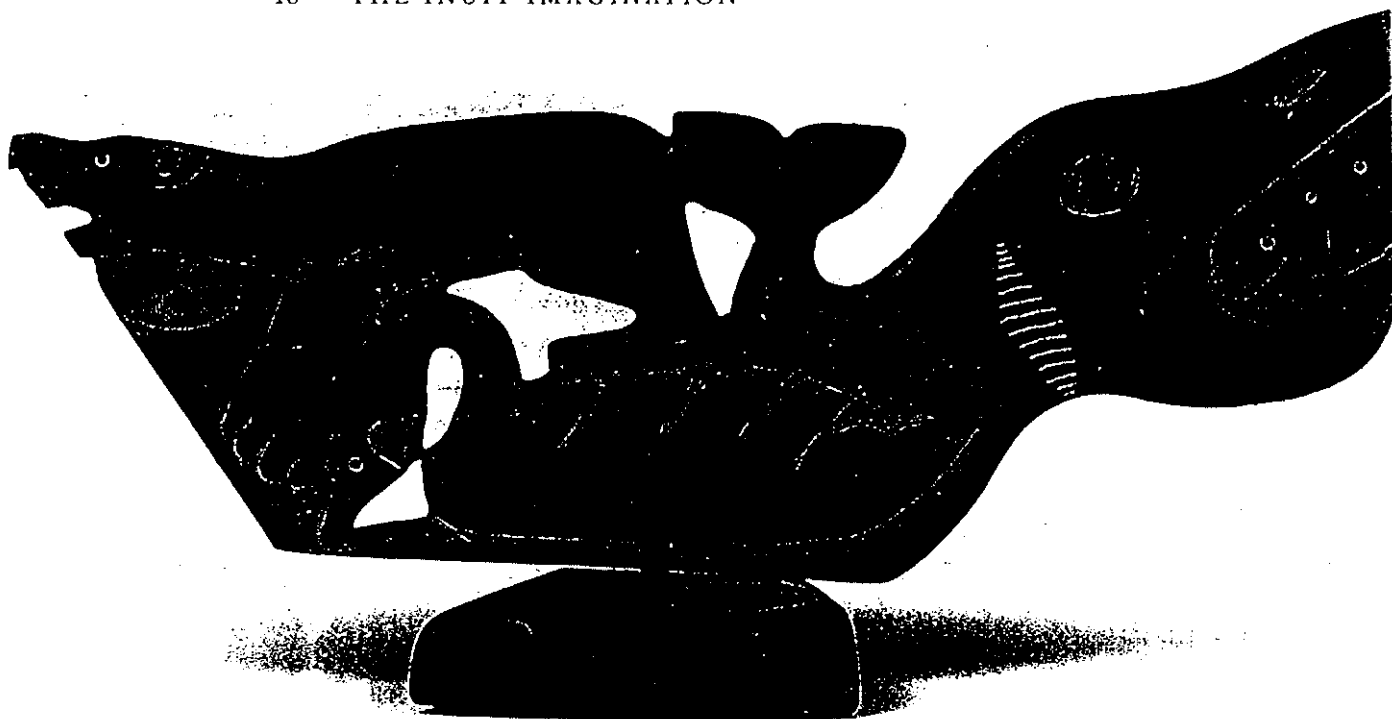
# 1. Inuit Stories

**S**TORYTELLING may have been the earliest art form. It is an essential means of individual and social expression common to all peoples. Every culture has evolved a framework of stories to describe and to reconcile the complementary worlds of reality and imagination. In cultures without writing, the storyteller has a particularly important role. Far more than simple entertainment, the stories represent the cultural memory and imaginative history of the community. They encode the values considered important for survival. Both the commonplace and the important events of life are understood in relation to these stories and the beliefs they express.

In the traditional world of the Inuit, every community preserved a collection of stories and songs that were considered its own. The stories fulfilled many purposes—to pass the time, to entertain, to record moments of joy and sorrow, to instruct and to preserve important values. Some stories were designed to shorten the long nights of winter by sending the listeners to sleep. The highest praise for one of these tales was to say that no one had ever heard the end of it. Inuit stories describe hunting accidents, abductions, personal conflicts, the cruel fates of orphans and old people, epic journeys, the origin of the natural world, and the spirit world. As in all folklore, there are numerous animal fables and stories dealing with healing and morality. Many stories were directed to children, teaching them by example instead of by punishments and scolding. The more important legends were repeated in relatively unchanged form over many generations. Others, which may have been told once or twice and then forgotten, were simple improvisations on events of passing interest, such as the loss of a seal while hunting or the beauty of summer.

Regrettably, the incursion of modern society has broken the chain of oral transmission of many traditional stories in the north. Most of our knowledge of the Inuit narrative tradition is due to the efforts of a small number of individuals who recorded stories when they were more current. William Parry and George Lyon led a British Navy expedition from 1821 to 1823, searching for the elusive Northwest Passage. They wintered in the Igloolik region on the northwest coast of Hudson Bay. Their accounts contain the first descriptions of the belief systems of the Inuit of the central regions. Lyon's curiosity about Inuit customs even extended to allowing himself to be tattooed on his arms in the style of Inuit women.

In the effort to document and understand traditional Inuit life, there are two names that deserve special mention, Franz Boas and Knud Rasmussen. Boas spent one eventful year in 1883-84 among a group of German scientists participating in an International Polar Year, a year of cooperative arctic research. Their base camp was located near present-day Pangnirtung on Baffin Island. Trained as a geographer, Boas travelled extensively and gathered an astonishing amount



**1. Henry Napartuk Kuujjuaraapik 1978 Transformation**

The piercing eye is a reminder that the shaman is the one who sees with an inner vision.

existence." In our own more skeptical time, we might make the same comment about Fleming's Christian stories and beliefs.

More recently, Raymond de Coccola has written a very unromanticized account of his twelve years from 1937 to 1949 as a Catholic missionary in the central arctic. With great insight he describes the struggle for survival of the Barren Land Eskimo, an isolated, impoverished group of people. His account emphasizes the important role of stories, legends and myths in their everyday life. At unexpected moments, songs and stories were used by all to express emotions and ideas. Father de Coccola was present when, without any warning, a small child asked, "Grandmother, tell me about Tarakapfaluk, the spirit who lives at the bottom of the sea." The grandmother then stopped what she was doing and told a simple account of the ancient legend. Her story began in a way common to all folklores. "Her name was Tara. She was a little girl who didn't like men. But one day a bird of the sea came and took the form of a handsome man. And she fell in love with him. . . ."

The Inuit tell many stories in the form of anecdotes, short remembrances of ordinary or unusual occurrences.

"Men and the beasts are much alike," said Aua [to Rasmussen] sagely. "And so it was our fathers believed that men could be animals for a time, then men again." So he told the story of a bear he had once observed, hunting walrus like a human being, creeping up and taking cover, till it got within range, when it flung a huge block of ice that struck its victim senseless.

Aua seems to be recounting a personal experience, but Rasmussen was probably aware that this story had been told for generations in the arctic. One hundred

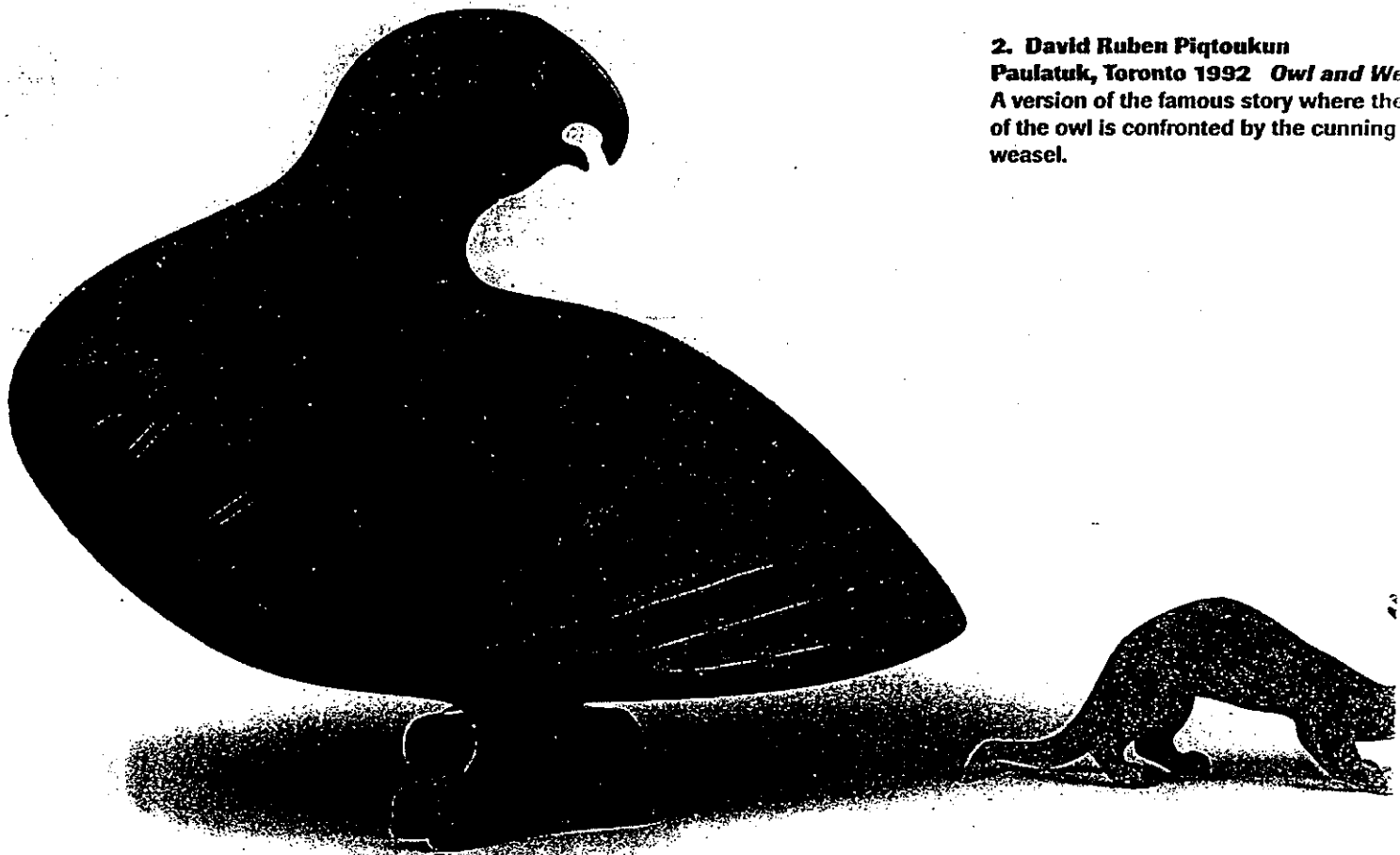
years before in the same region, George Lyon recorded a similar story from an Igloolik hunter's account. Whether polar bears can hunt in this way is conjecture, but the significant part of the story is its beginning, "Men and the beasts are much alike." Peter Freuchen also observed the narrative abilities of the same storyteller, "In the evening Aua built our snowhouses and stories concerning all the points of interest we passed poured from his lips. Here a number of persons had starved to death; at this lake great battles had taken place; at another point a large stone had killed a man while Aua looked on—the blood was still on it and would never disappear because the man had been innocent."

From the perspectives of a literate culture, it is easy to underestimate the strength of the oral tradition. The most elaborate legends may have an historical basis. During the Fifth Thule Expedition, Rasmussen attempted to learn of any recollections of the ill-fated Franklin expedition. The veteran arctic explorer Sir John Franklin had left England in 1845 with 129 officers and men on two ships to search for a Northwest Passage. After more than seventy-five years had passed, Rasmussen was successful in gathering information about the disaster from several informants. He also learned that the Inuit around Pelly Bay had many reminiscences of the John Ross expedition that had wintered in that region in 1829. The supplies left behind by these strangers—wood, iron, nails, chains and iron hoops—were still being used a century later in the form of knives, arrow heads, harpoon heads, salmon spears, caribou spears and hooks. Raymond de Coccola interviewed a hunter whose family had detailed recollections of the fate of the Franklin crew. More surprising, Archibald Fleming learned of a place called White Man's Island where the Inuit believed that white men had lived many years ago. He concluded that Martin Frobisher and his ships had wintered at that location in 1578, considerably more than three hundred years before.

One story collected by Rasmussen near Bathurst Inlet is more clearly a product of the imagination, yet it does make an obvious point. The young storyteller Netsit told of two hunters, one of whom has killed a caribou and the other a wolf. They have an argument about which animal has more hairs. To settle the argument, they decide to pull out the hairs one by one. This takes so long that both hunters die of starvation. The story uses humour to warn against pride and any kind of obsessive behaviour. Do not waste time on arguments, especially useless ones. The storyteller concluded with the sensible observation, "That is what happens when people busy themselves with aimless things and insignificant trifles." Another story that warns against pride and lack of attention to the important things is the tale of the owl and the marmot told to Rasmussen by Kivkarjuk, a Caribou Eskimo.

There was once an owl who went out hunting, and seeing a marmot outside its house, it flew towards it and, sitting down in front of the entrance, sang: "I have barred the way of a land beast to its home. Come and fetch it and bring two sledges."

But the marmot answered: "O mighty owl, spread your legs a little wider apart, and show me that powerful chest." And the owl hearing this was proud of its broad chest, and spread its legs wider apart.



2. David Ruben Piqtoukun  
Paulatuk, Toronto 1992 *Owl and Weasel*  
A version of the famous story where the owl is confronted by the cunning weasel.

Then the marmot cried: "Wider, wider still." And the owl feeling even prouder than before spread its legs a little wider still, and stretched its chest as far as it could. But then the marmot slipped between its legs and ran off into its hole.

Raymond de Coccola heard the same story of the owl and the ground squirrel, an account that differs only in one detail added to the ending. Pleased with the squirrel's compliments, the owl spread his legs as far as possible and inhaled more air to swell his chest. "That's beautiful!" exclaimed the squirrel as he darted between the owl's legs, biting the latter's crotch before disappearing into his underground home."

Rasmussen recorded many more animal fables in his travels. One is the story of the raven and the loon told among the Caribou Eskimo.

In the olden days, all birds were white. And then one day the raven and the loon fell to drawing patterns on each other's feathers. The raven began and when it had finished the loon was so displeased with the pattern that it spat all over the raven and made it black all over. And since that day all ravens have been black. But the raven was so angry that it fell upon the loon and beat it so about the legs that it could hardly walk. And that is why the loon is such an awkward creature on land.

Franz Boas related the very similar Central Eskimo story of the owl and the raven.

The owl and the raven were fast friends. One day the raven made a new dress, dappled with white and black, for the owl who in return made a pair of boots of

whalebone for the raven and then began to make a white dress. But when he was about to try it on, the raven kept hopping about and would not sit still. The owl got angry and said: "Now sit still or I shall pour out the lamp over you." As the raven continued hopping about, the owl fell into a passion and poured the oil upon it. Then the raven cried "Qaq! Qaq!" and since that day has been black all over.

Beyond the simple humour of these stories, they are clearly intended to teach children to be sensible and patient, to avoid anger and to keep their friends. In addition, they have a very practical purpose. By means of vivid images, they bring to life and make unforgettable important aspects of the behaviour of the animals on which Inuit life depended. At a deeper level, the stories say that in a former time animals and people were very much alike. The raven, the loon and the owl are all experimenting with their identities, only to learn that their ordinary existences are preferable.

Another witness to the importance of stories in traditional life was Diamond Jenness, who served as an anthropologist with the Canadian Arctic Expedition in 1913-18. He was frequently surprised by the spontaneity of song and story creation; "the day after we reached their settlement the Coppermine River Eskimos had a song about us, which was simply a new set of words adapted to

**3. Mathew Aqigaaq Baker Lake 1974 *Double Vision***

Balanced between two worlds, the angakoq looks to the future and the past. He sees the worlds of reality and imagination with an outer and an inner vision.



an old tune. Ikpakhuak was so amused over an adventure of mine with a wolf that before I had finished my story he had improvised a song about it; whenever he was at a loss for any word he simply filled up the gap with the meaningless syllables of *ai ye yanga*." In his first months in the arctic, Jenness travelled for a time with a small group returning from Coronation Gulf to homes on Victoria Island after an absence of two or three years. He was greatly touched by their joy in recognizing each prominent lake and hill and by the memories of earlier days that these landmarks called up.

Gontran de Poncins was a visitor from France to the region of Gjoa Haven and Pelly Bay in the late 1930s. Arriving unexpectedly in one igloo, he had not been there more than five minutes when he heard laughter coming from an adjoining igloo. "Bending forward, I looked in and saw — my own image. They were mimicking me . . . and the mimicry was done with so much art, with such perfection in reproduction of the intonation of my voice that I was stupefied." When he travelled with an Inuit family, de Poncins soon realized his comparative limitations in observing the world about him. "Where I saw space devoid of life, my Eskimos saw life. Again and again, Utak and his wife would stop, bend forward, stare at the ground, or leave the trail and go to the right and left, then come back smiling. . . . Nothing escapes them and their observation is incessant. For a stone that is not in its normal position they will stop, murmur, discuss; and then on they go with me behind."

The highly developed visual imagination that de Poncins observed enabled the Inuit to take possession of a landscape that seemed featureless to visitors. When about to cross for the first time from Igloodik to Pond Inlet on Baffin Island, Peter Freuchen was given a detailed description of the route that his small group should follow. "I carefully wrote down all the names they mentioned while my Eskimos just remembered them. The good thing about Eskimo names is that they always make places easily recognizable. Thus we had to go to Pingo, which means a round mountain top; then to Kuksuaq, meaning the great river; then to Tassersuaq, meaning the large lake; and so on across Baffin Island." In 1957, the Dutch ethnologist Geert van den Steenhoven studied the *ilageet* relationships among the Inuit of the Pelly Bay region. When he asked Tungilik to describe these complex food-sharing partnerships, he received a memorable reply: "Somewhere everyone is related to everyone here. But if you wish to know who right now really want to belong together, then take a look at how our tents are grouped or, in winter, how precisely our igloos are grouped. You will learn much from that." Tungilik found it easier to give an immediate visual explanation for a set of relationships that would be very difficult to detail in words.

From 1958 to 1966, Duncan Pryde managed some of the most remote trading posts of the Hudson's Bay Company, first at Spence Bay and then at Perry Island and Bathurst Inlet. He shared with the Inuit in these regions an almost traditional life. Returning one time from hunting seals on the ice, he found how comfortable a snowhouse could be. "It was warm and cozy; we brought out our tobacco and rolled a cigarette or pulled out a pipe. . . . The evenings were spent in storytelling and reenactments of the day's kill. Sometimes if a hunter had sat out on the ice all day long without getting a seal, he composed a song, singing that night the words he thought of while waiting for the seals that didn't come."

Pryde described one old blind woman at Perry Island as the mental archive of the community. "Not only did she remember all that happened to members of the band there, but she was the repository for all the fantastic stories and legends that the people treasured. An essential part of every drum dance was the break in dancing in which Arnayuk would tell a legend or tale."

In the Inuit world, the ability to tell stories well was a highly respected accomplishment. A skilled storyteller was always a welcome guest in other communities. Storytelling was a performance art demanding both training and talent. Many stories were recited rhythmically with voice changes, chorus or drum accompaniment, exaggerated physical gestures, animal mimicry, hypnotic repetition and other very dramatic effects. It is important to remember that the stories were created in an oral tradition. When written down and translated for our benefit, they exist in a new form without their essential dramatic, musical and visual components. Some of the early collectors of stories reported that the dramatic skill of the storytellers was so great that a spectator could follow the stories quite easily even if he understood only a few words of the language. To judge by the evidence of a collection of stories of the Mackenzie Inuit gathered by Herbert Schwarz in the 1960s, these skills have survived into recent times.

As I sat there and listened to his story there were times that I did not need to understand Eskimo to comprehend his tale. Felix Nuyaviak was not just a storyteller, but also a superb actor who lived and acted out the various parts in his story.

With expressive motion he paddled his kayak, he threw a spear, he freed his lines, and he sang magic songs. Finally there was triumph and enjoyment on his face as with a great effort, he hauled the whale ashore and sprayed it with water as the ancient custom demanded. . . . For the first time in the Arctic I listened to the stories as they had been told in the past with all the drama, mimicry, humour and playacting of the storyteller who kept his audience spellbound with the magic of it all.

Separated from this performance aspect, many of the recorded stories are inevitably disappointing as literature. The written stories often begin or end abruptly or omit essential details. This is understandable since in most cases the listeners for whom the stories were intended knew them as well as their narrators did.

The following story describing the origin of seagulls was told by Davidialuk Alasua Amittu, an artist of the modern period who lived in the Povungnituk area of northern Quebec. Before his death in 1976, Davidialuk recorded numerous stories in his many prints, drawings and sculptures, leaving a unique documentary record of the narrative tradition. In the collection *Eskimo Stories*, he introduced another tale with these words; "The stories of the old people are like dreams; we do not know them too well. The old men used to tell the stories. We heard them this way . . ."

They had set out on their summer migration, the women walking along the shore and the men in kayaks. The women got lost. They picked berries — all they could find to eat — and called out to their husbands that they were lost. It got dark and still they kept calling. One old woman kept calling "Where are you?" until she

turned into a seagull. All night long they walked with only the ripening red berries to eat. Then all the women and even the little children turned into seagulls and flew over the kayaks. There were no seagulls before this time. Sometimes they can see the seals in the water as they fly. The story goes that sometimes seagulls can eat people but actually people turned into seagulls.

This deceptively simple story contains many important features. A normal event in life conceals hidden dangers that lead to the most terrifying accident, the separation of the community. There is an intense struggle to survive, leading to a supernatural metamorphosis and the origin of seagulls. Children hearing this story would learn about the everpresent dangers of life, the closeness of the human and animal worlds, and how to recognize the cry of the seagull. The continuity of the storytelling tradition is shown by a very similar story recorded by the ethnologist Lucien M. Turner in the Ungava district of arctic Quebec almost one hundred years before.

Some people in a boat desired to go around a point of land which projected far into the water. As the water there was always in a violent commotion under the end of the point which terminated in a high cliff, some of the women were requested to walk over the neck of land. One of them got out with her children in order to lighten the boat. She was directed to go over the place, and they promised to wait for her on the other side. The people in the boat had gone so far that their voices, giving the direction, became indistinct. The poor woman became confused and suspected they wanted to desert her. She remained about the cliff, constantly crying the last words she heard. She ultimately turned into a gull, and now shouts only the sound like "go over, goover, over, ove."

The details of the two stories are different but the major elements are the same. In both versions, a few words are sufficient to create some memorable dream-like images. Both stories have an emotional appeal and much is left to the imagination. They centre on themes of separation and abandonment that occur very frequently in Inuit folklore. In the narrative tradition, there is no real distinction between historical accounts, legends and myths. As with these two stories, many others seem to have evolved from commonplace events. The simplest narratives are often related to the beliefs encoded in a complex mythology.

Lucien Turner collected numerous stories accounting for the origin of the different animals in addition to the legend of the seagull. These appealing narratives told generations ago among the Hudson Bay and Labrador Eskimo enshrine some important folk wisdom.

#### ORIGIN OF THE RAVEN

The raven was a man, who, while other people were collecting their household property preparatory to removing to another locality, called to them that they had forgotten to bring the lower blanket of deerskin used for a bed. This skin in the Eskimo language is called *kak*. The man used the word so often that they told him to get it himself. He hurried so much that he was changed into a raven, and now uses that sound for his note. Even to this day when the camp is being removed the raven flies over and shouts "Kak! Kak!" or, in other words, "Do not forget the blanket."



**ORIGIN OF THE HARE**

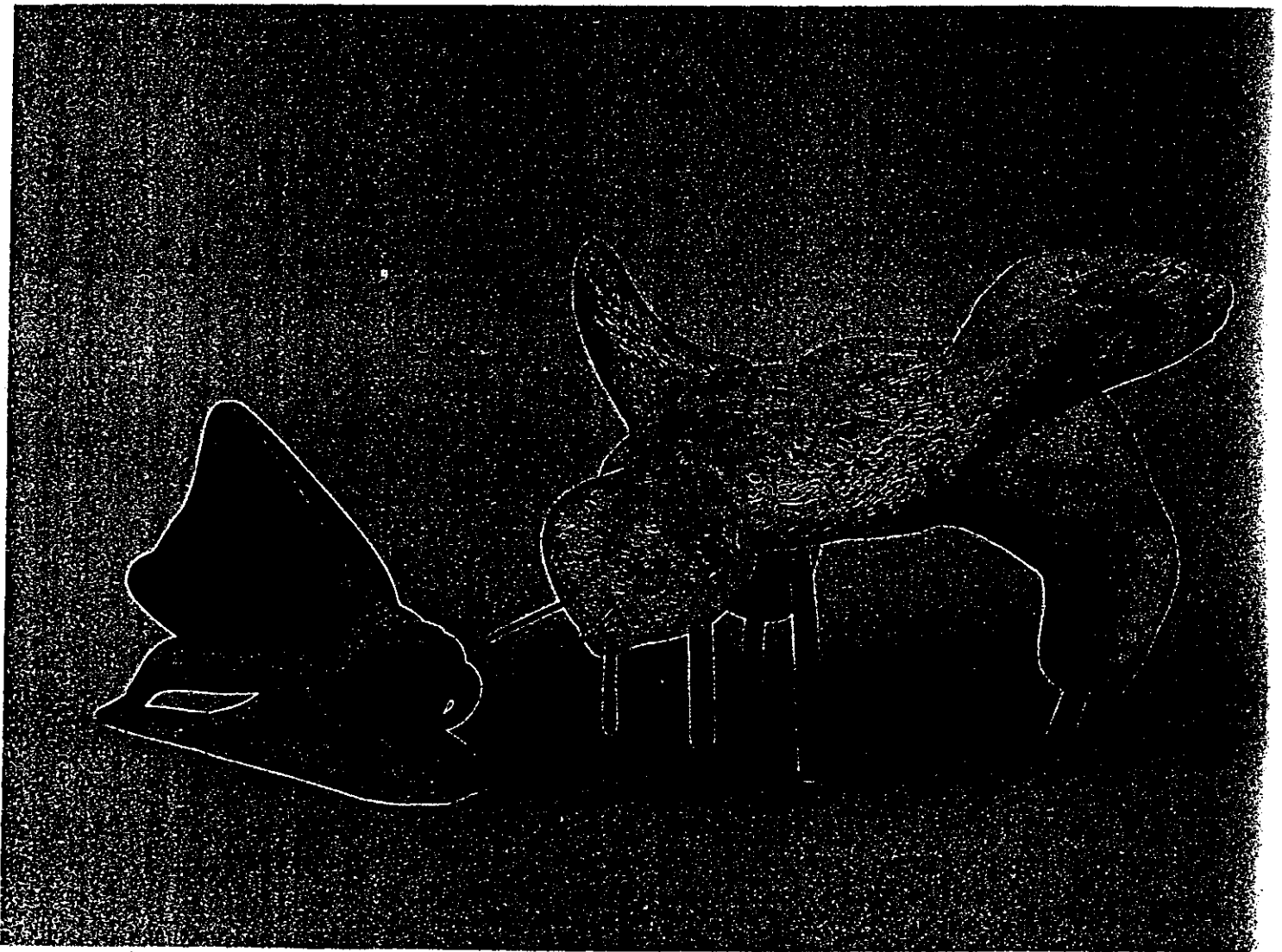
The hare was a child who was so ill treated and abused by the other people, because it had long ears, that it went to dwell by itself. When it sees anyone the ears are laid down on the back, for, if it hears the shout of a person, it thinks they are talking of its long ears. It has no tail, because it did not formerly have one.

**ORIGIN OF THE WOLF**

The wolf was a poor woman, who had so many children that she could not find enough for them to eat. They became so gaunt and hungry that they were changed into wolves, constantly roaming over the land seeking food. The cry of the mother may be heard as she strives to console her hungry children, saying that food in plenty will soon be found.

**ORIGIN OF THE HAWK**

Among the people of a village was a woman who was noted for the shortness of her neck. She was so constantly teased and tormented about it that she often sat



5. Peter Assapa Povungnituk 1982 *Insect*

Charlie Ugyuk Spence Bay 1989 *Insect*

There was an exaggerated fear of worms and insects, especially bees. Flies were carried as amulets to make a person invulnerable since flies were difficult to catch. Each spring, they seemed to return from the land of the dead.

for hours on the edge of high places. She changed into a hawk, and now when she sees anyone she immediately exclaims, "Kea! Kea! Kea! who, who, who was it that cried 'short neck?'"

**ORIGIN OF LICE**

Lice are supposed to drop from the body of a huge spirit, dwelling in the regions above, who was punished by having these pests constantly torment him. In his rage to free himself the lice dropped down upon the people who condemned him to this punishment.

**ORIGIN OF MOSQUITOES**

A man had a wife who was negligent and failed to scrape his skin clothing properly when he returned from his expeditions. He endeavoured to persuade her to mend her ways and do as a wife should do. She was again directed to remove the accumulated layer of dirt from the man's coat. She petulantly took the garment and cleaned it in such a slovenly way that when the husband discovered the condition



of the coat he took some of the dirt from it and flung it after her. The particles changed into mosquitoes, and now (in spring) when the warm days come and the women have the labour of cleaning clothes to perform, the insects gather around them, and the women are thus reminded of the slovenly wife and what befell her.

#### ORIGIN OF THE SWALLOW

Some small children, who were extraordinarily wise, were playing at building toy houses on the edge of a high cliff near the village in which they dwelt. They were envied for their wisdom, and to them was given the name "Zulugagnak" or "like a raven," which was supposed to know all the past and future. While these children were thus amusing themselves, they were changed into small birds, which did not forget their last occupation, and even to this day they come to the cliffs, near the camps of the people, and build houses of mud, which they affix to the side of the rock. Even the raven does not molest them, and the Eskimo children love to watch the swallow build his *iglugiak* of mud.

#### ORIGIN OF THE GUILLEMOTS

While some children were playing on the level top of a high cliff overhanging the sea, the older children watched the younger ones lest they should fall down the bluff. Below them the sea was covered with ice, and the strip along the shore had not yet loosened to permit the seals to approach. Soon afterward a wide crack opened and the water was filled with seals, but the children did not observe them. The wind was cold, and the children romped in high glee, encouraging each other to greater exertion in their sports and shouted at the top of their voices. The men saw the seals and hastened to the shore to put their kayaks into the water to pursue them. At this the children increased their shouts, which frightened the seals till they dived out of sight. One of the men was angry, and exclaimed to the others, "I wish the cliff would topple over and bury those noisy children for scaring the seals." In a moment the cliff tipped over and the poor children fell among the fragments of huge rocks and stones at the bottom. Here they were changed into guillemots or sea-pigeons, with red feet, and even to this day they thus dwell among the debris at the foot of the cliffs next to the water of the sea.

#### ORIGIN OF THE SEA MAMMALS

A woman who had lost her husband lived among strangers. As they desired to change the place of their habitation, they resolved to journey to another point of land at a distance. The woman who was depending on charity had become a burden of which they wished to rid themselves. So they put all their belongings into the *umiak* (sealskin boat) and when they were on the way they seized the woman and cast her overboard. She struggled to regain the side of the boat, and when she seized it, the others cut off her fingers, which fell into the water and changed to seals, walrus, whales and white bears. The woman, in her despair, screamed her determination to have revenge for the cruelty perpetrated upon her. The thumb became a walrus, the first finger a seal, and the middle finger a white bear. When the former two animals see a man they try to escape lest they be served as the woman was. The white bear lives both on the land and in the sea, but when he perceives a man revengeful feelings fill him, and he determines to destroy the person who he thinks mutilated the woman from whose finger he sprang.

To our way of thinking, Inuit stories often seem fragmentary and capable of considerable expansion. The legend of the origin of the hare does not say that

**8. Natar Ungalaq Igloolik 1985 *Dying Father***

Not so long ago, sons and daughters had one last duty to perform for their aging parents. Out of cruel necessity, a dying father would command his favourite son to help him to die. Natar Ungalaq shows an old man who has left his possession behind as his son leads him away from the living.



the child was ill treated almost certainly because it was an orphan. Otherwise it would have been protected. A common form of abuse (at least in stories) was to pull on the child's ears until they grew in length. Other versions of the legend of the origin of the sea mammals expand the rudimentary account recorded by Lucien Turner into the primary creation myth of their belief system. Why did the strangers in this legend desire to change their place of habitation? This is explained very frankly by the description Turner gives elsewhere of the relevant customs, an explanation that would not be needed by Inuit listeners.

Aged people who have no relatives on whom they may depend for subsistence are often quietly put to death. When an old woman, for instance, becomes a burden to the community it is usual for her to be neglected until so weak from want of food that she will be unable to keep up with the people, who suddenly are seized with a desire to remove to a distant locality. If she regains their camp, well for her; otherwise, she struggles along until exhausted and soon perishes.

Despite the incompleteness and occasional incoherence of these origin stories, something of their force and significance survives translation. Herbert Schwarz collected many stories from one storyteller but, as he writes, "Some of these were just isolated fragments which I had to piece together." Even less fragmentary longer stories often have a tenuous logical coherence and outsiders may look in vain for some unambiguous meaning. There is rarely a sustained development of a central theme with clear moral conclusions. This is illustrated very well by the brief story of the creation of the caribou collected by Rasmussen, an account that raises many more questions than it answers.

Once upon a time there were no caribou on the earth. But then there was a man who wished for caribou, and he cut a great hole deep in the ground, and up through this hole came caribou, many caribou. The caribou came pouring out, till the earth was almost covered with them. And when the man thought there were caribou enough for mankind, he closed up the hole again. Thus the caribou came up on earth.

Perhaps the prize for compression of details goes to the legend of the origin of the Inuit, recorded by Lucien Turner.

A man was created from nothing. It was summer and he journeyed until he found a woman in another land. The two became man and wife, and from them sprang all the people dwelling there.

Turner evidently failed in his attempt to have a fuller explanation of this fable. These creation stories have a definite, pragmatic quality that does not invite the storyteller or the listener to interpret or to speculate. He writes, "It is extremely difficult to get the native to go beyond the immediate vicinity in which he lives while relating these stories and legends. They invariably maintain that it was 'here' that the event took place." It is notable that these stories do not involve gods or god-like beings but instead deal with ordinary men, women and children. Some interruption in normal behaviour leads to supernatural events and consequences, usually disastrous, follow.

When reading these stories, they seem at first to be little more than a sequence of strong visual images held together with a minimum use of repetitive language. Turner describes the old women relating the history of the former days often "interspersed with recitations apparently foreign to the thread of the legend." In their original cultural context, the dramatic emotional effects were often more important than the logical connections between the different parts of the stories. De Coccola noted that, in their stories, the Inuit simply accept the universe around them instead of trying to analyze it. "They are basically unemotional fatalists inclined to reduce their philosophy to a single expression: *Ayornartok* (it can't be helped)." This one word was used to dismiss all misfortunes; "There isn't anything one can do about it—that's destiny, that's life." A common saying was, "Today we are happy; tomorrow is a long way away."

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter studied the Aivilik Eskimo living in the northwest coastal regions of Hudson Bay. He came to the conclusion that chronological sequence was of very little



**9. Jonah Janesah Iqaluit 1980 *Angakoq's Dream***

**The angakoq's familiar spirits help him on his spirit journey. The walrus-tusked shaman faces backward so that he may regain the human world.**

importance in their mythology. He described his difficulties in comprehending one storyteller. "He was apparently uninterested in narrating his story from the ground upward, for he began with the crisis, so to speak, and worked backward and forward, with many omissions and repetitions, on the tacit assumption that my mind worked in the same groove as his and that explanations were needless. It produced the most extraordinary effect, one reminiscent of that achieved by Joyce and other sophisticated writers who deliberately reject sequential time. I was later forced to rearrange clusters of statements so that they represented an historical sequence — only then did they become coherent to me."

Several decades before Carpenter's observations, Diamond Jenness had made a similar complaint about the inability of the Copper Eskimo storytellers to follow a logical train of thought; "a native will never tell a story straightforwardly from beginning to end. He starts in the middle, returns on himself to explain some allusion, and wanders backwards and forwards in this manner until he has completed all he has to tell. He is easily diverted into another channel or another subject. Direct questions, unless they are simple requests for an enlargement on some remark he has just made, almost invariably confuse him, and he becomes incoherent or silent. This explains to some extent the amazing variations in the accounts that different natives give of the same event or story where the words are not stereotyped into fixed formulae." Using almost the same terms as Jenness, Gontran de Poncins also experienced difficulties in understanding an Inuit storyteller. "He began in the middle, pronouncing directly the most important word in his mind. Then he went back to the beginning of a phrase and started afresh. . . . Suddenly images would flow through his mind, but so many that he could not reduce this chaos to order." De Poncins recognized that the

white man's way of putting his questions was usually counterproductive. "I would ask a question directly to begin with. Then I would have to attenuate it, explain in roundabout fashion what I was getting at."

In his influential book *Sculpture of the Eskimo*, George Swinton addresses the question of the lack of organization of Inuit narratives. He detects some positive qualities where others have found confusion. "The many versions, the disorganized and repetitious accounts are not at all surprising. Neither are the ambiguities, nor poor or fragmentary presentations. These hazards would not be encountered only by an Eskimo ethnologist; to me, they are part of the entire Eskimo system of life and aesthetics. The strength and vitality of Eskimo art, and one might also speak here of philosophy and thinking (both as a process and product), lie in an undifferentiated, syncretistic approach in which details can be repeated, omitted or even added without affecting the whole meaning. In this regard Eskimo art and thoughts are very much like television programs or serials with interruptions from commercials, distorted reception and added living-room conversations, but which—interruptions and conversations notwithstanding—can be readily understood almost in spite of themselves. It is this very casualness of communication, combined with the capacity to draw attention sufficient for understanding without learned commentaries, that is typical of Eskimo art and traditions."

An illustration can allow the viewer to participate in the telling of a story, selecting some elements for emphasis and rearranging the chronological sequence. This necessary visual element found expression in surprising ways among the Inuit. Archibald Fleming recorded his fascination with the complex string figures created from a light leather thong about six feet in length. "They illustrate the stories they tell by means of these representations and once you understand the art you have no difficulty in seeing the hunter stalking the caribou or the seal popping into its hole or the boat in the water or the bird hopping over the land." Another Anglican missionary, Donald Marsh, described some of these string figures as masterpieces of ingenuity and complexity. He observed the game played by two people who would pass the string back and forth, making progressively more complicated patterns until one of them could not think of another move. Marsh commented that this game rivalled chess for its logic and intricacy. Raymond de Coccola was also intrigued by the creative patterns formed in the string game, calling them "a concrete means of transmitting their inner thoughts." He learned to recognize a trotting caribou, a seal basking in the sun, an arctic hare running away from a fox, a man and woman embracing, male and female genitals, and many other figures. He believed that these almost unlimited patterns compensated for the absence of illustrated books or graphic art. Considering the origins of Inuit stories, it can be argued that their essential cores are conveyed much better by a visual medium than by any purely literary form.