

Cover Essay

Winsome Travellers

Not many of us, these days, set off in hunting parties to search for food or push small boats out into the sea, although there was a time, not so many millennia ago, when this was what we, as a species, did. This was the hard glory and pain of our work. I imagine it was a time of camaraderie and danger, of stealth, bitter near-misses and hunger, and exuberant satisfactions. Around the world, change has overtaken us quickly, but heterogeneously. There are people who set off in small boats still, but more often they are fleeing poverty or seeking happiness than hunting animals for nourishment.

Late one evening in May of 1968, I stood with my back to a fire, staring into the forest, the shouts and cacophonous choruses of moonshine-riddled field workers drifting on the night air; I picked bits of fired-charred hair, gristle, and splintered bone from between my teeth, pondering the meaning of my first and only experience as a hunter.

I was 19 years old, and had traveled by truck, train, and bus overland from Europe to India, where, in Calcutta, I ran out of money. A volunteer agency director who knew my father back in Canada took pity on me and offered me temporary work in a food-for-work project in rural Bihar. One weekend, the people with whom I was working announced that we were going to have a “hunt.” What this meant was that we, the white hunters, would line up behind some trees at the bottom of a hill. We would wait there while the bush beaters—local young men in search of some paid employment—would circle far around and drive the game towards us. It was the height of the dry season, dust and heat rising everywhere, the shrubbery crackling dry. On our way to the hunting site, we crossed a gravel riverbed and dug down several feet to get at the water to fill our drinking flasks.

There were four of us hunters, as I recall—three men with guns, and me with a small pocket camera. We stood quietly, like shadows behind the pale, listless trees. As the cries and shouts of the bush beaters came over the rocky hill towards us, I could hear a snort and crashing of shrubs. Suddenly into the opening in the gully before me, a black, hairy, wild pig burst into the open—and headed straight towards me. I had a fleeting moment of panic before the guns brought him down.

The pig, slung over a pole between two men, was carried triumphantly back to the house.

While there are still hunters and gatherers, on land and at sea, or at least people who can still remember them and tell their stories or draw their pictures, most of us now expect our food to come to us, from wherever we can get it. This food trade involves not only the domestic animals we see, but the parasites, bacteria, and viruses we don't see, who tag along for the ride, invasive species every bit as awesome and powerful as Chinese carp, rabbits, cane toads, sparrows, tiger mussels, or *Aedes* mosquitoes. Our insatiable desires are changing the very structure of the world we inhabit.

Even those of us who eschew the temptations of imported foods—if we can, on those days when we are feeling strong, or righteous—seek the spectacle, the strangeness, of charismatic mega-fauna; we are not interested in a wild pig roast these days. Yet I am amazed at how deep this lust for strangeness runs. We want to bring species far from their homes. Pot-bellied pigs, monkeys, brush-tailed porcupines, wondrous birds and fish. We trade money for ecology. It is the spectacle that draws us, the prospect of something mysterious, or dangerous, or perhaps reassurance that we are, really, masters of nature. Do we feel so powerless in our personal lives that we need the assurance of mastery of a

pet Gambian giant pouched rat to bolster our egos? Even the most environmentally strident among us strive to retrieve the wonder of nature through eco-tours and extreme sports, or by bringing home pieces of animals, as food, or trophies, working ever more earnestly to create some story of the hunt, the illusion of close human companionship in the face of danger. But we do not live in that world.

When Napachie Pootoogook, in her little house in Cape Dorset, drew the convivial group heading out into the perils of Schabuk Inlet in their skin boat, she could not know that some of us, seeing her *Winsome Travellers*, would see not our fathers or aunts or brothers looking for dinner, but a planet in space, a small circle of warmth in the great black darkness. There we are, not exactly in spaceship earth, more like old boat earth, telling each other tales, wondering where the hunt is taking us, one of us looking over the edge, paying careful attention to nuances of motion and color, the telltale traces of the other life we dream of.

There is still wonder in the universe. There is wonder all around us, in the jungles, yes, and on mountains and deep in the sea. But also in the minutiae of our daily lives. If we see the wonder there, close to home, I think yet that we may learn to tread lightly on the earth. Seeing the people in the boat, I think of all of us, drifting through the icy chunks of space, the wonder of who we are, with whom we share this journey, how we pull together on the oars, our solidarity, the warmth and light and stories we give each other.

David Waltner-Toews

Art and Culture Editor

Cover Art

Winsome Travellers by Napachie Pootoogook

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Napachie Pootoogook was born in 1938 in Sarko, a small camp on South Baffin Island in the Arctic. Her father died while the family was on a long trek, when the children were still quite young, and the family survived by the grace of the supportive Inuit community. She later moved to near Cape Dorset where, in the late 1950s, as a young mother of several children, she began drawing. Her mother, Pitseolak Ashoona, who was living with the young family, was also an artist. They lived in a house with no electricity or heat. She gave birth to 10 children, 3 of whom died, 2 in a house fire from a lantern used for light. Of the tragedies, she said, “Even though I have gone through difficult times, I want to stay on my feet because nothing can be done about it.” For a time, they moved to Iqaluit, but she found the small settlement “too crowded.” In 1999, mother, daughter, and a niece, Suvina Ashoona, were featured in a special exhibition of three generations of Inuit women artists. A traditional throat singer, storyteller, and local historian, as well as an artist, she has said, “I enjoy my life as I get older. I have tried to live my life to the fullest. I will not try to become a ‘big person’ just because of my experience in life. Because of the things I went through in life—both the bad and the good times—I have become a better person and I am grateful for that.”

One can only hope that we, as a species, will be able to say as much when we face our end. Napachie died, after a long illness, in December 2002.

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