

NORTH POEMS

ix

believing

that man came to  
live in the middle  
of darkness in a  
dead silver sky

rain from a pelt  
dipped in urine

the long dark  
nights punishment  
for killing too  
many animals

their spirits rise  
with the spirits  
of places

ghostly caribou  
in the sky the  
fire

xiv

in the spring they  
came to port au choise

followed the whelping st  
lawrence seal north

the ice retreating in  
the rose light of the fire

polished slate arrow heads  
told of the moon's grief

snow melting all night  
in the tents their arms

trembling birds and  
salmon in the wind

by fall people left  
each other for

a caribou hunt  
this phase of their

lives unclear

xxviii

the old often  
changed their  
names to bring  
summer into  
their bodies

they left warm  
blood in the  
snow for the  
soul in animals  
bones in teeth

clams or quartz  
crystals on a  
hill shaped like  
a man's face so  
the earth's soul  
might be touched  
by sun

xxx

following the river they carried  
slate blades knives inlaid with

ivory needles in a skin  
needle case no one knows where

they first found iron  
they moved with the

stars entered their houses  
from the west the thin layer

of bones and ash frozen in the  
moss floor suggests

no one stayed long

xxxii

what was inside and outside  
joined nothing can change

that bears have a spirit of their  
own that can charm traps

souls of the worm  
live under the water

spirits in the hills in  
the snow are always watching

so when you eat a sea  
mammal never offend its spirit

xxxiii

the athapassem  
the least known indians  
21 tribes

named by the  
traders: yellow

knives dog  
ribs slaves  
beavers

carriers

this from the widows'  
carrying their dead husbands'  
ashes in a basket  
for 3 years

xxxiv

packing sleds  
in the green light  
of the aurora

caribou and  
wolves in the  
big dipper

the pleiades,  
branches on antlers

xxxvi

1000 ad. winter  
houses built of  
sod and stone  
driftwood domed  
snow houses 60  
could dance in  
skylights paned  
with stretched  
walrus gut. they  
stretched ropes  
of sealskin :next  
to sex jumping  
on them was the  
best part of  
winter

xlix

hunting sea otters thru  
the ice at breathing  
holes shivering numb  
all life connected to  
animals whose souls  
could be charmed  
with ivory dolls  
the red blessing

but if you  
kill more animals  
than you need  
the sun goes away

lv

dark afternoon the  
thick snow

no one saying what  
he feels the  
stillness presses  
turns something  
inside out icy

a man whose wife doesn't  
want him may rip  
her clothes if she gets  
bitchy tear her  
lips to her cheeks

run home and he'll  
slit the achilles tendon  
so she can't walk  
there again

lxi

angakuk shaman

inside a tent  
swaying beating  
the tambourine  
like a drum over  
his body

other souls start  
pulling him

everyone falls in  
to a trance souls  
of animals rise in  
the hut the men  
strain to hear  
what to do about  
their families

where the seal and  
caribou will move

lxiv

the baby's soul  
from a dead relative

nobody speaks  
harshly or slaps

the child who rides  
close to his mother's

nipple. black  
nights in bed with

his mother and father  
touching each other

someone always holds  
the child so

the dead won't  
be offended take

vengeance by causing  
humps bowlegs or

large ears to grow

-- Lyn Lifshin

Niskayuna NY

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