

## Breath Channel

They squat along a channel of blue water  
that seams a shelf of ice soon to be a floe  
in spring: a father with steady line,  
a mother with sharpened blade,  
a child wishing the myth of seal  
might shatter the surface calm.  
Breath's debt to air gives them patience.

*Blood always takes its time.*

Under cloudbanks of ice, a seal surges  
toward the fissure of shadowy green light,  
air sacs nearly spent. Down here  
the choices are never trivial. The blur  
between breath and death depends on  
monotony, unrelenting silence, absence.  
A single shift of bone above can echo  
against eardrums like a quavering spine.

*Blood always takes its time.*

Above the gap, death is never kind, only  
sudden – a slap of bear claw that rends  
the skull, or a thrust of sharpened steel.  
The seal must finally choose its channel  
or drown. So, after knives and ropes,  
it bleeds spring onto the warming ice.

*Blood always takes its time.*



*breath channel*

*M. Higgins*

## Life-blood

naked, we sleep the warmth together  
between caribou skins, mama, papa and me  
then my breaths wake to dance one finger  
of seal oil flame into bear and muskox  
shadows on the laughing  
ice walls

father, uncle and grandfather  
today sharpen best for seal  
the dogs already lolling blood  
tongues through darkness to lighten  
for harness

*How can summer be for sleep when the sun disk always keeps  
her toes dry day into day? Papa dreams for the mines and sleeps  
mornings with women he drinks with, mama plays bingo the  
hours, as I watch sister whine after her gone boy and nibble  
uncle's pills.*

papa thickens his hands with wolf  
gloves to go the wind, his hairs  
whitening to grandpa with frost threads  
then fastens behind the sled  
to shout ice at the dogs for speed

far enough, the dogs loose pad to sniff  
air out of old bubbles, then grandpa  
shaves snow down to the hole  
for the wait, harpoon stiff  
as char drying on sun poles

*Her eyes slipping to white, sister sleeps the wrong, so I must run  
gravel bare past the sticking honey pots to where the nurses are  
and ring my thumbs sore on the night bell. Nurse tries for a bot-  
tle game as they lay sister to moan on skins not caribou but red:  
"Can you tell us, honey, how many, what colour, the pills were?"*

girls laugh the morning as mama  
eyes tight spins for our darting,  
laugh when she traps our voices  
in her fingers, laugh into her  
skins when she nets us like leaping char

outside, the boys laugh snow drifts  
into dunes – they are owl  
diving claws for rabbit, bear

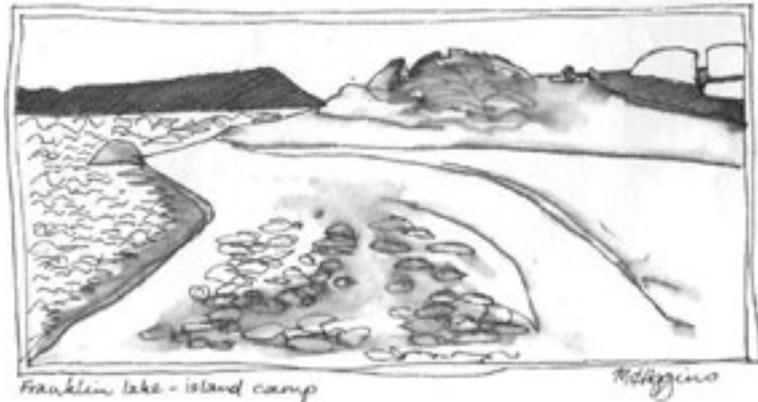
sinking teeth into walrus –  
their steamy rolls warm  
the wind

*Sister tries to twist from their needle after the tube snakes down  
her throat bringing back the pills in pink splatters. "Enemies!"  
she shouts at them, twisting. To miss her slap, I find low corners  
as they strap her in red skins on the plane "for rest." But her  
eyes pinch my lids in sleep: "enemy!" she screams in me.*

harpoon copper deep between her darkening  
eyes, the seal is heavy as soapstone  
as papa lifts her to spurt blood  
onto snow like midnight sun  
splashing clouds into day

seal's blood-spirit rises in us  
from this liver we chew:

I laugh at mama's fingers red  
as spring flowers and do not  
wash away the sticky  
before sleep



## Found Poem

### NOTICE

Echo Bay Mines, Ltd. offers  
a day of Inuit games  
this Saturday, in Coppermine,  
featuring, for men, knuckle-hops,  
foot kicks, one-leg hop kicks,  
arm and head pulls, toe and knee jumps,  
muskox fights and lip tugs;

for women, tea-boiling,  
bannock-making, doll-stuffing,  
fish-filleting and seal skinning  
(all women to bring own ulus).

Children under 16 to guess  
at jaw breakers in glass.  
Prize: Sony ghetto  
blaster.

Time permitting, Inuit Square Dance.

On-going barbeque comprising hot  
dog, hamburgers, buttered  
buns and pickles.

Flight south at nine sharp –  
no liquor on-board, no sleeping  
overnight.

## Lead Dog

The sled is ready  
yet even its whip  
depends on you  
to see over ice  
that sun forgets

At harness  
the other  
dogs wait  
for the urge  
of leather  
that sparks

with you

How do you find  
the track before  
the footfall?

How do you find  
the heat before  
the flame?

How do you find  
the will before  
the thought?

## Husky On Leash

No season's harder than spring  
when the *kamotik* thaws its runners  
to rust silently on a boggy mound.  
Your master's whip sliced  
one ear clean off last snow  
when you leaned too far  
onto your own track  
but the spurting blood only warmed  
your muzzle like a spring sun at noon.

Now you must mourn in ellipses  
that even lemmings can mock.

Small children come with stones  
in diminishing spirals of respect.  
Soon they will know only motors  
not blue eyes intent on flipper,  
tusk and hoof of floes. You hunker.  
Your lips fester for the tuning fork  
of tundra to compose a thicker,  
healing, diminuendo of night.



## Inukshuk At Dusk

Eyes of stone, I sit sentry  
to a bog, seasons braced

beneath my toes. Caribou  
screams splatter the canyons

of my hypnotic spears. I point  
hunters to fish, the cold

arcing to flesh in igloos. I better  
the melting footholds between stars

because no clouds can conceal  
my shoulders. Radiant spur

on this slice of tundra, I eclipse  
the sun. I tease desert into shoals

for slavered paddles. My harmonic  
casts the very flicker of gods.