

**Jean Bédard**

**The song of innu land**

**Translation by Richard Clark**

*My sisters  
the four winds  
caress a land  
of lichen and of moss  
of rivers and lakes  
there where the white spruce  
spoke to my father.*

*They walk  
unbent attentive  
to the sounds of the snow  
under the snowshoe  
message--sticks  
await them  
in the middle of the frozen lake*

JOSEPHINE BACON

# LEXICON

AKUP: coat.

ANAANA: mama.

ARVIK: whale.

ASHTISHAT: mitten.

ATAATA: papa.

ATSHEN: cannibal monster.

TSHAKAPESH'S BEARD: lichen that forms a kind of greenish beard on old conifers.

EDECHEWE: the one who is always traveling around the world.

WHITE FAT: kind of cheese made from bone meal and marrow that is allowed to ferment.

INUKSHUK: arrangement of stones set up in the shape of a man.

IRNIQ: boy.

KAKUNA: "I love you very much."

KOMATIK: Inuit sled drawn by dogs.

KUDLIK: lamp carved from stone with a wick made of moss.

MASHK KATSHISH (abbreviation of Katshishtemauaput): brown bear.

MESSENAK, or MISSINAK: turtle, or master of aquatic animals.

NITASSINAN: the Innu land.

UMIAK: sort of rowboat made of sealskin.

PANIK: girl.

PAPAKASSIK: master of the caribou.

PAVA: long knife used by the men to cut the snow.

PISHOU, or PISHU: lynx.

QARMAT: hut made of skins, stones and earth, and held up by poles.

SHASHUAN PELSHISH: swallow.

SHESHATSHIU: meeting place in Labrador.

SHISHIP: duck.

SILAT<sup>†</sup>TUQ: to become wise.

TAKUNAKAN: backpack with a wooden frame in which a baby is carried.

TICIPITAKAN: square platform about a meter and a half wide which the Innu sometimes made for the boys' initiation ritual.

TSHAKAPESH: one of the first ancestors. He facilitates the connection between the being below and the being on high.

TSHIASHK: seagull.

TSHITUTETAU: "Let's go!"

UAPUSH: hare.

UHU: owl.

UINIPEK: great lake.

UTTSH: tent, shelter in a broader sense.

ULU: knife in the shape of a half-moon, with an ivory handle. Used for scraping as well as cutting.

UNAMAN-SHIPU: river of Ochre; meeting place at the mouth of the river today called the Romaine.

# TOWARD THE NORTH

## One

Listen, for I am old.

I have perched on this stump for a truly very long time. Arthritis.

I see the ages raise and rock the massifs of stone that stretch as far as the eye can see in the tundra north, the Land without trees. There, enormous humps of granite move a yellow, mauve and turquoise lichen worn down and reborn in cycles of seventy years. All this liquid of stone so slowly undulating, I can hear it now: the grandfather mountain lying down on its old earth at last.

I wink every thousand years - an old hunter's reflex - and, at sunset, my shadow covers the swaying plateau (ascribe this to fatigue).

To the north, their shoulders leaning over the edge of the horizon, mountains stretch their broad necks to look down into the abysses. Gradually, wind and weather relieve them of their own weight: they are made round like geese, then raise their necks and fly away into the sea of stars. Other mountains, closer to me, come out of the earth brand new, take the same road and prepare for their great migration across the black waters of the night.

I have also witnessed the formation of enormous glaciers, which melted afterwards and ran off through a thousand rivers. The torrents hollowed out the rocks and separated the humps. And now, lakes open their great eyes smoking with mist.

Not very far to the south, the spruce of the taiga approached the tundra and retreated according to the mood of the glaciers. The trees came out of the snow, cracked in the sun, grew old, fell into dust, disappeared. Then they sprang up again, like a seal's hair after molting.

Uniform breathing of my old grandmother earth.

The slowness of this breathing doesn't particularly help the joints. From time to time I must open my wings, straighten my feet and jump into the wind.

\* \* \*

A very long time ago, I was young.

One morning, I surprised a mama bear rummaging in an old log, searching for honey for herself and her baby. What she didn't know was that the day before, my uncle had brought me to the same spot for my first solo hunt. I was thirteen winters old.

The difference between the mother bear and me? One day. A single day. I had arrived a day before her, and my uncle had left it up to me.

I had followed a bee to its hive and found the old log. I was careful not to touch it and spread my scent over it. There was quite a tangle of branches there, and only a single way through them to the honey; around it, a dense thicket. It was in front of this passage that I set my trap: an enormous log ready to fall on the head of anything careless.

I was proud of being a day ahead of the bear. I lay in wait for her. As expected, as soon as she arrived she rummaged in the old log. Excited by the smell of the honey and tortured by the bees, she didn't smell my scent. One more small vibration and the log would crash down on her head.

She moved her nose forward. *Bang!* She fell down stunned. I leaped from my branch, axe already in the sky of my bravery.

And then the bear suddenly awoke, stood straight up and looked at me tenderly. My heart went all around my brain. Terrified, I finished her off with three thrusts of a knife.

Then I turned my memory away from the image of the mama bear.

All this food and all my pride swelled in the middle of the feast. I filled the whole village. Lips dripped with juice and fat; the sharp eyes of the women and the girls shone. The men looked at me up and down. I lavished gifts. I put the village in my debt, I bent it toward me. I had become stuck up.

Everything had happened according to my plan and my will. My ruse had been perfect. But that evening I had eaten my own heart in the bear's. Before dying, she had looked at me for too long a time. The moon was now running on the mountain and drowning the sea. The sea came and drooled its yellow moss on the beach. I ate kelp to make myself vomit.

I went back to look for the bear cub.

Pishou (Lynx), of the Unaman-Shipu clan, had just been born. He was named Bear Cub. For good reason: he would be raised at the same time as my baby bear. Later he would gain the name of Pishou. A strange name for a bear like him.

What scatterbrained me didn't know was that the mama bear had been a lot more than one day ahead of me. She had prepared her trick since the beginning of the world, from her cave under the snow. It was a plan as big as the moon and easier to see than the sun itself. And yet I had fallen into it without seeing anything. She had given herself to me long before the mountains started out toward the North. And I raised her cub in the hope of redeeming myself. She sure got me!

Her cub left one fine day, giving me my heart back. But it was no longer the same heart. It makes me so painfully happy today that I have lost the notion of time.

We have to laugh, and laugh some more, for there is always someone who gets up before us. We run after the honey. Yes! We all run after the honey. The flowers are beautiful; the girls

catch us in their nets; in the middle of the winter hunger transports us on frozen lakes so that we can pierce them with fishing holes; thirst makes us fall on our knees in the brooks; the north wind that makes our dogs howl leads us who knows where... We constantly walk from one trap to another.

I had done a good job setting up the log in the thicket. The little trap was mine. But the rest, the trees, the treetops, the trunk, the bees, the honey, the sky, the moon, the earth, the sea, the bears, unhappiness and happiness, the immense trap prepared many moons ago, tell me: who perceives its scent?

\* \* \*

My grandmother finally named me Uhu (Owl), because at night my dreams lifted me from the earth and in the morning I disappeared on a branch.

From my stump, I look, I look and my eyes are lost like the horizon in the twilight.

The good thing about eyes is that they leave everything intact. They don't move anything and only bring back from things a thin drawing on a roll of light. In this way, an eye's digestive tube can absorb the world without the stomach being bloated in the slightest. The only thing that slows the eyes' digestion is the beauty of the sunrises on the far North's white torso. It is an egg, one might say, broken on a white fox fur. And the mountains lick their sides in order to be nourished by its colors.

To digest everything by looking, and to only eat mice, this is my fate.

An owl is a pair of eyes on a vessel of feathers, something detachable. Despite this fact, there are rhizomes and fibrils that leave from my heart and are attached to the runners of honey, to all the runners of honey. One by one, they all become my children, even the wolf, even the seagull. It's stronger than me: it's like harpoons planted in the skin of the living, and we no longer know what side we are being pulled from. If one of them tightens the rope, I hurt all over and I swiftly fly off towards him. Crazy me!

That's what Nitassinan is: the heart roped to all living things. The territory.

From the first to the last, all my ancestors hover here, on the Land without trees where the taiga dissolves. I see their lips murmur between the massif's humps while their eyes hover, invisible, over the seas. The grandmothers whistle and the hunters mumble. The bird clan rests on stumps and blackened trunks, like me. A crow, an eagle, a vulture, a wild goose, a duck, a Canada goose, it's one pair of wings...

The sand rolls on Nitassinan, it sings our respect for our old grandmother.

## Two

The old man that I am takes pleasure in watching the young people frolic. It's true that as I stitch bits of memory together on my stump, I sometimes forget to eat, but the opposite is also true: when I hunted in the forests of the taiga with my sons, I only thought about feeding myself. I am evolving on two sides of life: bird, Innu.

My son's child is a daughter. At the time this story takes place, she was at the shaky beginning of her adolescence.

It was autumn. Dawn had not yet lifted the night's thick fleecy clouds. Even so my granddaughter uncovered her face and pressed a bearskin around her shoulders. Seated on two layers of fur, she wasn't cold. She was singing cheerfully, as cheerfully as a marsh in the spring, when the frogs moan with pleasure in the chirring of crickets.

I would have preferred a milder season. It wasn't the customary thing to have a child climb up on the ticipitakan on the eve of winter, but above all it wasn't the custom to have a girl go up on it. But nothing was customary any more since what remained of our family left our gathering place, on the north shore of the river of Great Waters.

The trees, the moose and the beaver hadn't followed. We were in ancestral land, and yet an unknown land. Fortunately, for some days the sun had become entangled in its first rays and warmed us all day long.

The journey would be just as implacable as it would be long. In the immensity, there would only be three of us. The contours of the mountains were almost bare. Grass held on in the hollows, but all the round places were bare, and the dawn had just deposited its flecks on the lichens spotting the stones.

Over immense lengths, glaciers had scraped the rock, packing down walls of loose rock on their sides. Braids of water linked the humps. From the pools and the smooth clear lakes images of the rising sun arose. There were so many lakes that none of the sky's surveyors, neither eagle, nor hawk, nor falcon, could hide its image on the water. Rodents didn't need to look at the sky to watch out for their predators: they simply turned their eyes toward the mirror of a lake. The owls remained thin.

It very rarely happened that an Innu family went up that far to see, touch, and listen to grandmother earth. She was going to speak to us through the mouth of the Inuit, the man of the ice. We were going to hear first of all the howling of his dogs, then the banging of a big sled in the fissures. An Inuit family was going to pass by there, for we were close to the routes of the caribou's great migration. A few more days and we would cross their paths: lines dug into the rock and lichen by their annual passage.

But for the present, my granddaughter was ending her childhood on the summit of a ticipitakan perched on three stunted trees, of the height of a standing bear, among the last trees of the taiga.

It wasn't the best time, but it was the only one possible. The child laughs for a few years in her nest, then comes the time when they make her climb on this wooden raft, and an animal form comes down to seize her and shut her in to one particular story. From her birth to her puberty, the child has already covered the outlines of her life. She has already lived, but in the way of the wind and the rain. Then, here she is, ready to be contained in a bark of flesh where she can act and endure her short existence.

Before setting out on this adventure, the child must catch hold of one end of the totemic stem that attaches her to this platform, this lightness from above which will always be part of her: childhood that continues to laugh and play with the stars, far above the rocks and treetops. By the other end of the stem, the narrower, she will be rubbed against the rock, most of the time severely. From this rubbing, sparks will spring, of pain and anger, the dark smoke of resentment. And then her heart will light up from the rubbing and she will begin to see her way. By one end, she will always be walking between the stars, she will dance, she will run to the free air without ever hitting anything or even feeling hunger, while below, in the brush and on the rock, she will be torn.

Long ago, after hunting the mother bear, I too was hoisted on to a ticipitakan. An owl took me between its wings and plunged me into the forest. It gobbled me into its thorax, it sewed great wings in my shoulder blades, it pierced two screaming eyes in my adolescent skull.

I am still stiff from the pain of this operation. When I take off, my shoulders torment me. But through my eyes, I can easily free myself, slide on the colors and return with images painted on rolls of light. I am almost always perched on my stump, and I look.

I am called Uhu. I am an old man, a little crazy, who left for the North one day in the hope of curing my son and of freeing my granddaughter, so that my people might find the path of joy again. But otherwise I never leave my shell of feathers. I observe. If I am hungry, I tear my wings away from the pain, I dive and pounce on the little tufts of hair scurrying in the grass. Otherwise, I spread my looks like fishing nets on the world, and all my memories radiate around my pupils turned toward her, my granddaughter.

\* \* \*

Sing, my eldest son's daughter, sing the warm day coming. Who will you be when one of the forms of life will have seized you and thrown you into the herd? What will your place be, your condition, your destiny, your short journey among the people of the Innu? And what bird will you be on the ocean of rocks? An eagle perhaps... It makes no difference to your grandfather Uhu! All places are good, all destinies are equal: a rubbing on stone, a fire in the sky. Life hurts, but it is in order to set the rush on fire and plunge it further into the night.

\* \* \*

My little one will learn soon enough that, if the body is beaten by the winds, the eyes remain intact. The gaze is not wounded on anything, it doesn't get worked up, it is not irritated, it just caresses the lightest thing in the world: light. Everything that is grated and dispersed in

the forest of the dying, this flesh, these shavings, this sawdust, nothing of this ever reenters the skull of an owl; only color and its trembling enter his house. Light is the sound of the solar drum. Wind-driven sand makes the earth's skin tremble. And sometimes a gust of wind pierces the clouds and comes all the way down to the bottom of a cave to fertilize a mother bear.

\* \* \*

Perched on my stump, I watched my granddaughter struggle on her ticipitakan. I had built this raft between tortured conifers covered with Tshakapesh's beard. The goatees hanging on the branches would protect her from the breaking of the totemic rush.

### Three

Before her birth, my granddaughter had come and shaken the closed fur of our tent. I thought it was an ancestor, for the beard had come off the pole and a light had started to dance around us. Shiship (Duck), my wife, had woken up. When the light disappeared, she cast an adolescent glance at me, suppressed a giggle, sat up, placed her knees on each side of my flanks, and carried me away...

She hadn't carried me very far away... Taking the form of a couple of partridges, we turned around the two parents: our son, Tshiashk (Seagull), and our daughter-in-law. They couldn't resist our assaults of desire.

Nine moons later, she was born, their daughter, our granddaughter.

The rocks have gooseflesh because of the lichen that tickles their backs; an old man quivers when he hears his granddaughter whirl around him. The end takes pleasure in its beginning. The ancestors perched on stumps and tree trunks, all the bird clan, had closed around the nest, happier than a porpoise.

The ancestors had accompanied her in her childhood games. She had accomplished the first achievement of her life, a happy childhood. And they, for their part, had a very good time. They were still there, watching the girl fight on the ticipitakan of her first flight.

But that was just it, it was her first flight, and they should have left her to herself.

Only then did she sing her call:

"Listen to me! My grandmothers and my grandfathers, listen to me! Mountains and lakes, listen to me. And you too, Mama. Come down from your stars, for it is cold in the great drum. Even you, drum, too great, too taut, too glossy, and hard of hearing, shut up and listen a little!"

Her voice was clear. The clouds scarcely budged. Everyone gave ear, for a woman was forming in the child. She continued:

"I am on the platform, like a boy. Father has gone away for the hunt. We will have to eat soon. Grandfather surprised me putting dried moss in my leather pants soiled with blood; then, laughing, he perched me on top of a ticipitakan with only three bearskins for baggage. Father and grandfather need a third hunter, for the caribou have gone too far up toward the north, and I don't want to hunt, I want to do like my mother and my grandmother: pick berries and tan skins..."

This lamentation was laughable, for the tone beneath it gave the opposite impression. Under her feet, a river of pride bubbled, made her tremble with fear and pleasure, climbed the post to grab her hair and carry her away far above the ticipitakan.

Clouds were scratching the taut blue leather of the sky. Beneath them, the granite humps, the mossy hills, all the stone hammers and bone grinders were beating their chests. They wanted to answer her challenge: "A girl. We won't go easy on her!"

And me, I was laughing to myself. My granddaughter was provoking them. I saw the sparks of her anger burning the brush.

She was singing: "I see your white teeth too well, you, the mountain range who rolls your rocks on us. They are coming to crush my bones like a grandmother grinds the caribou's long bones before mixing its powder with the marrow to make the delicious white fat we eat on feast days and wedding days. You want to do the same with me! Well, my dear, dear mountain range, you won't have my marrow or my bones. You've digested my grandmother, you have swallowed my mother, but you've spat me back up more than once because I was too green for your taste. I am not ripe for the stars. I'm going to laugh between your teeth, I'm going to break them, I am, by laughing. If you swallow me, I'll burn your stomach..."

My granddaughter was singing rather cheerfully.

Ah! How good it is for an old man to hear the happy arrogance of youth shoot its arrows into the impassible air of heaven. For an old man whose embers are expiring in their final glow, at the hour when ashes smother memories in an equal depth of sadness, nothing is more invigorating than a young girl who raises the fist in which she keeps all her ignorance enclosed.

\* \* \*

Did I have any choice? My granddaughter had to climb on the platform of her entrance into the people here below, and I had to help her. She had to do it like a boy, for now we were only two men. Then she would have to survive until an Inuit family came by to help us in our quest.

To the south, on Nitassinan, the people were losing their fire. The moose, the hare, the partridge, the porcupine, the seals, the salmon, the fishes of every kind continued to feed us, but a climate of sadness had set in. We were an old people with tired eyes. The mountains no longer moved, everything was frozen, the great drum no longer sang, for we no longer knew how to contemplate the movement of the rocks. The bird clan lacked eagles, falcons,

loons, ducks, but especially the white geese, the terns, the great migrators. There weren't enough eyes above the forest and the sea, not enough eyes to see from the east to the west, from the north to the south, from the beginning to the end. So, the people ate without interest, lived without knowing their place; acceptance became submission, disputes multiplied, they demanded chiefs...

All things were living hopelessly well; only the bird clan was declining. We no longer even felt the need to perch higher in order to see farther.

But why? We had to find this out.

The caribou of the forests had left us; they had gone back up to the north to join their cousins of the tundra. Only a few old males wandered in the Nitassinan of the north shore of the river of Great Waters. We wouldn't be able to survive for very long without them; why would a people want to live without the marrow of the caribou? A marrow that runs on the seas of rocks and lichens, bones that fly in numberless herds more joyful than woodchucks in springtime, a spirit that dashes as quick as the wind, swims like a beaver transporting a tree on its head, a laugh that slides between the lips of the setting sun... We wouldn't be able to do without them.

The Innu have always been the shadow of the caribou. It is what led us here. During all the journey of mists, on the ice fields, the tracks of time, in the wandering generations, well before our meeting with the river of Great Waters, it was like our life standing in front of us. If life was leaving us through hunger, the caribou came into our mouths to enliven us; if life was leaving us through sadness, it dance in front of us to cheer us. It was our honey and our guide, it was our trap, our honey and our end. All the sea of stars that migrate in a single direction are the caribou up there on the blue drum. Without it, we are a lost people.

\* \* \*

I had instructed my granddaughter:

"The Innu resembles a rush that a child draws the story of a hunt with. The end that does the drawing goes from one hunger to another hunger. The end that moves in the sky goes from one purpose to another purpose. The Innu who lets the weight of life cut the rush errs at both ends: on earth, he is caught in his own traps; in the sky, he gets tangled up in his own thoughts. The caribou runs on the stem, it braids it, makes it unbreakable, repairs the nicks.

-- But what hunt are you talking about, grandfather? she asked.

-- Haven't you noticed that the water you drink turns yellow before you void it? This is to better feed the earth. The brook enters your mouth, washes your blood and then goes to give sustenance to the grass that a moose will eat with appetite. Haven't you noticed that the roasted meat you eat has changed its odor when it goes out the other end of your body? This is in order to resupply the earth, the nourisher of all of us. Everything is moved and is transformed, everything moves us and transforms us. We are the earth in movement...

-- Corpses feed the earth too...

-- The end swallows the beginning. The beginning swallows the end. Memory swallows life and life swallows memory. This is what it is, the hunt: to make life pass into us in order to delay the day when we will pass into it. To make memory pass into us and pass into the memory of another.

-- The grass: is it memory?

-- Grass is the sum of all plant life from the humus up to the flower. The wolf is the sum of all animal life, from the turtle up to the eagle. How could we survive in a tangled and incomprehensible forest? We need all the memory of the world, because we face all the trouble of the world.

-- And the Land without trees...

-- We will see more clearly there."

My granddaughter was ready. She could find her place in Nitassinan. So I had built the ticipitakan, and she had sung against the mountains and against the rocks.

## Four

Now I have to talk about the strange force that made us go up toward the north. We had been no more than a fir needle in it swept away by the torrent. But how had a needle been able to go against the current? For this was surely what had happened.

In the beginning, one might have said it was a dull humming. The mountains had shuddered. The rocks had whispered in the wind. A flock of geese had come to chatter close to the encampment. Salmon had jumped in the river like the nipples of bitches chasing their pups.

A mama bear, standing against a waterfall, was throwing fish to her little ones. They caught them on the shore. The more the bear cubs ate, the more the salmon jumped for joy in the basin.

My son Tshiashk's best hunting partner, Pishou of the clan of Unaman-Shipu, had had a vision of this she-bear. He had trapped it but, unlike me, had spared its life; he had simply taken a big tuft of fur from it and made it the hem of a bark bracelet. He reserved this object for the first boy in the village to discover his bear nature on the ticipitakan. The mother bear was celebrating her spared life by throwing salmon to her little ones.

But that day, no one could understand that the bark bracelet and the fur hem perfectly answered questions which for the moment remained unresolved: how can our family go up the river to the Land without trees, when the torrent goes down and, above all, the strength of the clan is declining?

How can a salmon go up a torrent? Can the desire for the origin prevail against a river descending to its end?

Distant storms had rumbled. On the horizon, the clouds had grown heavy like mountains and were drawing the black skin of the firmament toward us. It had rained for days and nights. The rivers were full of rage and fever, of silt and branches; they came down like furious herds. One might have said that the sky wanted to break its clods on our heads in a rain of mud.

Listen well!

A murmur and unusual sounds had seized the ears of my son Tshiashk. Voices had taken his head between their hands. A fury had buzzed in the distance and enclosed itself in the circle of his drum. I had looked at my son standing in his wall of noise. He had stretched out his hand. I tell it as I saw it: all of Nitassinan's rock convulsed in his open, fleshy hand. The lines of his hand were undulating like brooks; the dents of his palm vibrated like mountains struck by thunder, and we heard the wail of the drum that his astounded fingers had let fall to the ground.

What did this wailing say?

A few days later, a bull moose with its antlers still larded with velvet had come to offer itself to the village. It was in rut. Mad with rage and swollen with power, it was seeking a relief. Tshiashk had pierced its lungs with two arrows. After its death throes, I had opened its belly and arranged its digestive tract on a bare rock, stomach toward the east, anus toward the west. A wind had risen from the sea. Nitassinan's slow digestion was reflected in the bowels of the moose. The whole process was presented to us, long, definite, yet incomprehensible. We were somewhere in it.

I had approached my son. Silence had pressed us one against the other, and a flash had connected us.

In the intestine, I had spotted the bird clan's two canoes. They were going up the Netagamiou river all the way to its marshy sources. Then all the tracks were lost in a quagmire. But, at the end, we saw the son of Pishou, Tshiashk's hunting partner, fishing for salmon. He was wearing his bark bracelet hemmed with bear fur, and all of a sudden his hand pulled an Inuit girl out of the water.

We eat bits of memory, our dreams digest them, traditions clothe us with memories, signs speak to us, and we never understand anything. Should the bear get the Inuit girl out of the water or be carried off in an owl's eye? Is there a secret passage in a salmon pool that allows a bear to enter the rising of a bird? Who can know? Do such questions even have a meaning?

After that omen, we made an alder basket. We put the moose's viscera in it and hoisted it to the top of a big cedar, and the ravens came looking for them.

\* \* \*

The following spring, it had rained for days on end. The sky wanted to purge the earth. The rivers were saturated with bitterness. Lumps of yellowish slobber ran down the escarpments,

flowed into the holes, ran with all their might toward the sea. The sea was swollen and rose in great round waves. The shore disappeared, the trees were wading in the water. Tremblings and moanings shook all the earth as the sky perspired, scattering flocks of gulls and gannets.

An enormous birch was wedged between two rocks in an overflowing falls, its roots stuck between the teeth of stone. It hung head down. Its hair had undulated in the foaming water before losing all its leaves. The trunk shone in the water. It called to Tshiashk: "Come deliver me, and I will carry you away."

We waited until the summer exhausted the river, and, with the bark of the birch, we made a sturdy canoe, replacing another that had broken in a cascade.

\* \* \*

That summer, the hunting, the gathering and the fishing had been more than favorable. At the end of the season, we had at our disposal an abundance of berries of every species and a very great quantity of fat and dried meat.

Then, Tshiashk had said:

"Messenak, the ancestor of the fishes, is going to make us go up toward the north. We must not fear him. He is carried by mountains and whole forests. He keeps supplies of fry in his mouth, schools of fish as wide as lakes. His muscles are storms. He wants to swim in his origins, sow seed, be reborn. With him, we are going to find ourselves very far to the north, beyond Nitassinan, and we will know why the bird clan is declining along with the caribou. It is time to depart.

-- Now! I exclaimed.

-- Now, he answered.

-- This fall!

-- Yes, while the river is weak and Messenak is strong."

\* \* \*

Messenak had taken us all by the hair and drew us toward the north. Our poles did not get tired; they pulled our arms and made our two canoes leap over the waves. In the portages, it was the canoes that hauled us by the shoulders, lifting us off the ground and taking us beyond the cataracts and thundering.

The more the storms wear away the rocks as they carry their debris toward the sea, the more the salmon forges forward. Desire goes counter to lassitude. It is as tiny as a little sperm in the scrotum of a male; it is full of the sky. It wants to be opened even as the earth closes over it. The more desire is weighed down, the more it wants to widen. Everything is there in this crossing. We live in it, we reproduce in it, we will die in it.

In the salmon pool, transformations, in the eye of the owl, surprise.

\* \* \*

Tshiashk had been captured by the salmon and had carried us beyond the high marshes.

But a price had to be paid. In an unforeseen violence of the river, our women were swept away in the lead canoe. We saw them pass beside us and give themselves to the waves, my wife and my daughter-in-law. An exchange that seemed quite natural: their surrender for our ascent. Their gazes quieted the torrent, they were embracing us, already they were ascending the totemic stem leading to their star. Their bodies had fallen head over heels into a falls, they had been opened like flowers on the rocks, their blood reddened the billows. We hadn't been able to do anything, for our hands were riveted to our poles. Along with them, the two young men who were accompanying us and a large part of our provisions sank into the belly of the torrent.

Tshiashk had scarcely turned his head, for we had to save ourselves, and the struggle against the waves required all our attention.

\* \* \*

Fat with their lives, Messenak transported us up to the sources of the Netagamiou, beyond the big marshes. Without our women's great crossing, we wouldn't have been able to get out of the bogs. Sometimes carried by the water, sometimes stuck in the mud, pulling our canoe loaded with provisions, we were sustained by their colossal smile. In a breath that caressed the back of our necks, they drove away the mosquitoes.

\* \* \*

We were now only three: the little one, too young; her father Tshiashk, the seagull, the best hunter of all the Innu people; and me, Uhu, the one too old.

During the winter, I cut stones and made axes, knives, arrowheads and harpoon points. I tanned skins, I made mocassins and mittens. I taught all this to my granddaughter. She learned with the vigor of one who wants to live.

Once we arrived at the edge of the forest, at the moment when we left it to venture into the Land without trees, we raised our canoe to the top of a large pine with the point hanging on a broken branch. Our baggage was already attached to strong headbands of bark, ready to be carried. We only had to wait for Tshiashk, who hadn't returned from hunting.

But, in coming down the tree where we had suspended the canoe, I made a misstep and smashed my foot on a stone. Then I sat down on a stump and stayed there for a very long time without saying anything.

"Are you tired, grandfather? the little one asked me after a long panting silence.

-- Let me get my breath back," I answered.

I looked at her and smiled.

"Now it's you who will tan the leather and sew the mocassins. It's you who will cut the stone, fish and hunt."

\* \* \*

Tshiashk had still not returned. I could walk a little with the help of a stick. I hobbled like a partridge with his foot caught in a trap. And my granddaughter laughed at the mimes I made to hide my pains.

Before taking the route to the Land without trees, I had sat her down on a branch and told her this story from the beginning:

"In the beginning, the wind swallowed the wind, the water devoured the water, the mountains disappeared in the abysses, the stars faded in the night. The plants were swallowed in the paunch of the caribou. The monstrous Atshen devoured the Innu. Everything swallowed everything without anything having the time to take shape. And then one day the belly suddenly got dizzy. Digestion took place more slowly. And time separated the swallower from the swallowed. One wind pursued another. A wave pursued a wave. The abyss waited for the mountain before swallowing it up. The caribou watched the lichen cover the stones before eating it. And Tshakapesh delayed Atshen's meal by telling him stories without head nor tail. The hunt had begun, for the prey was fleeing before the predator and memory was running after challenges. Thirst was felt, hunger and desire. Then plants covered the earth. Animals covered the plants. The Innu got up from his stump to glean the blueberries spurned by the bear and take the little caribou abandoned by their mothers.

-- And how did the birds arrive?

-- The sky and the earth had been one immense ogre who devoured himself. Then the mouths and the prey moved apart. Eyes were needed to track and to watch, and wings to raise the eyes and finally make them see the face of the swallower. To separate the swallower from the swallowed was not enough: it was also necessary to separate the eye from the great devouring. You see, we are going to be chewed, then assimilated, then spat back out; isn't it a minimum of justice to be able to look in the face the immense grandmother who will devour us?"

\* \* \*

The day after our arrival at the edge of the Land without trees, my granddaughter hid in order to put some absorbent moss into her leather pants, and I was strong enough to build the ticipitakan.

Then I sat down on a stump to listen to her sing.

## Five

She was singing up on the platform. She was summoning her ancestors, all the bird clan. They arrived one by one. Sometimes, it was a gust of wind, a smell, a pensive cloud; at other times, it was a shoulder of rock that had moved a fir out of place, trees that torn their hair

out during the night, a color that had crumbled on a distant mountain. They came, they turned their coats inside out, they teased each other, they passed over her in silence, inspected her, sat down, loading the whole circle of Nitassinan with their big fat stomachs.

Before all these events, before the signs, the floods, the first advances of the salmon and the ascent of the Netagamiou, when he was just one hunter among the others, Tshiashk had had a vision.

He had danced all night, making the drum of the clan resound (which wasn't the custom, for the one who beats the rhythm can't lift his own feet), singing and dancing as if he alone were a people. He was seized by his vision. The flame of his body moved in agitation on the back of a rock and melted into the dying hearth of the sun. His shadow on the red horizon sketched a hunt in the spirits of the night. The whole bird clan had participated in the dance. Summer had brought us together, the Innu families of Nitassinan, the clans. Everyone spied on the new marriages being prepared. All that was lacking was a little white caribou fat and some smoking herbs.

At that time, we were still numerous in the opaque, blind and limited form of makers of shadows: ten hunters, their wives, their children, young people of both sexes, a true clan of flesh and blood that the light of day cannot pass through, a clan that makes shadows that grow tired as the sun gets higher, disappear at noon, lengthen in the evening to unite with all the others at sunset and with them make the night. And the ancestor-spirits, which don't make shadows, forming a great circle, sticking out their chests with pride at the sight of our number, of our hunts and of our visions. We were, after all, their reflections on the rocks of the earth, among the trees, the stoniest of all the animals. Tshiashk was the most opaque of all. So it was on him that the vision formed, like a shadow on a rock. But it wasn't he who saw it, he did not see it, he underwent it. Shiship saw the shadows on the rock that was her son, but she said nothing, nothing except that we must meet the Inuit in order to avoid our extinction... Her eyes said all; her mouth, nothing more.

After that vision, Tshiashk and all the bird clan left for a great caribou hunt. It wasn't customary to leave so early. But the clan wanted to return with some white fat before the families dispersed for the winter. I, already too old, stayed on the coast with Shiship.

The expedition had been profitable, an enormous quantity of dried meat and bone fat had been brought back. Tshiashk was flying on his happiness. But the others were weeping, for the losses had been enormous: after this long hunt, the bird clan numbered no more than our little family. Tshiashk hunted better than the eagle, but he saw less than a frog in the bottom of a marsh. With him, they hit each other everywhere. Without him, we didn't eat.

All these signs took place before our departure.

\* \* \*

Today, my granddaughter summoned all those who no longer cast a shadow, for from now on we are only three on the side of the carriers of bones and baggage. Too many ancestors,

too many spirits for so few backs and arms. The entire clan was there; I recognized them in spite of their foggy forms. And my granddaughter was singing:

"Who am I in the sunrise? Who am I in the sunset? Why do I have to carry all this weight? You who no longer have shoulders, nor foreheads, nor necks to lift and transport what the Innu must eat in his journey, and his tools, and his hunting weapons, why do you concentrate all this burden on me? You, the past, why do you make me carry the future alone?"

And she complained proudly, happy to be in the center, to be the passage through which the future had to go. All the clan was concentrated on her, she, the last living womb of our wings and our tired eyes.

"I am going to unite with a bear. I tell you, with a bear. I will have claws, and I will tear the mountains..."

\* \* \*

The day progressed, shortening my granddaughter's shadow. At noon, the shadow of the south was very small and, for a few hours, my granddaughter carried the weight of her life alone.

Overcome, she slept for quite a while.

She awoke like a flame, stood up on the platform and resumed her singing:

"What! you aren't strong enough to carry me? Open your wings, let me look at the other side of the circle and of the horizon. Let me at least look. Down there, the mountains, further away, the oceans, even further the blue wall of the sky, and the vault, and the stars which are not birds, but earths, rocks, islands... I ask it of you, of you who are not strangers. I want to be a mountain range, no! I want to be a Nitassinan, for, if I must carry all this future, let me put my feet on the rock."

\* \* \*

She stood up, strong as a mountain cedar, then she fell into a trembling emptiness. A mild wind came and wiped her face, and she fell asleep.

Shortly afterwards, she got up again and again provoked the sky and the earth. But in all the noises, the fears, the hopes and the despairs, silence was at work. It was wearing away her childhood, it was grating the fat from her skin, the whole game of her life was becoming a question of resistance and of letting go. It was driving its stakes into her chest, and from inside her heart there rose up into her eyes that strange liquid that belongs to women alone, and which allows them to dissolve the pride of mountains with just one look. Tears ran down her cheeks.

"I will be fertile," she cried, "at last. I will live on all the farthest reaches of the earth."

\* \* \*

She became as beautiful as the moon. She took off above the clouds. She made the summits blue and tore the reds of twilight, dispersing them in the black expanses of the night. An owl had perched on a branch at the height of her hair. It had lost its hunger, and its eyes went slowly all around the world without catching on anything as beautiful as her. A deer sinew linked the owl to the girl's totemic stem.

The moon passed.

My granddaughter had become the reason for cold and heat, for mountains and seas, for the migration of the caribou and the geese. All this space was necessary, all these seas and all this wildlife, to form her face and for this to become her grandfather's Nitassinan.

The entire landscape made her a fur cape. And, as if to make sure that it really was her cape, she turned her head. The whiteness of the ice and the grayness of the rock were transformed immediately into a red, pulpy, marshy flesh heaving sighs of coupling. And nests everywhere bore speckled eggs.

Was she going to become a mama eagle?

\* \* \*

And then the silence completed its work. The dome of the world collapsed on her. A heart was beating in the silence and, around the heart, a woman was formed in the child.

She was nothing anymore but a woman naked in bear furs, like a valley that welcomes the wind, and the moisture, and the fog, and the dust of mountains. She trembled like a girl who waits for a moose to come out of the forest, for him to shake his antlers, for him to make her laugh.

"Yes! I want your male organ. Yes! I want to carry your future. Yes! My people, I will give you immense wings and piercing eyes. Yes!"

\* \* \*

Nothing, no; nothing is sweeter for an old man than to see his granddaughter ready for fertility. She suddenly understood that the smallest cavity is the origin of all the great things that oppress us: these cisterns of rock, these seas full of sperm whales, the whole sky's alcove and the thick circular shield that supports us. Everything comes from woman, and woman comes from herself, from her own desire compressed in the infinite solitude of the stars.

She lacked everything, and so she felt everything. Finally, everything was present to her as a weight, because everything was absent from her. She could germinate from the whole world.

But who would that mother be?

She waited for the sign. I waited for a sign. Great wings were going to come. The silence had whistled all night long. The day was dawning. The sky slipped on the horizon like the flesh

of a salmon on a drying-rack. A spot was going to form, descend, spread out, cast its ray. Some thing, a force, an animal...

\* \* \*

I didn't see anything. I was the fool, the clown.

In the armpit of a branch holding the platform, an abandoned swallow's nest... No, the bird had flown away because of the noise I made in building it.

Then the silence settled in again. And the swallow returned, light, happy, carefree as it pirouetted, dove and spiraled. It looked at the girl a moment, then chirped and landed in its nest. It poked fun at the Innu girl: "Why didn't this girl leave with the fall migrations? A latecomer, like me."

A swallow! Shashauan Pelshish.

The whole crowd of ancestors had burst out laughing, their bellies bouncing in the mountains.

"Don't laugh!" she cried. "The swallow is faster than its shadow, more agile than any of us, it hunts over an immense territory and can cover the whole of Nitassinan in a few days. All it needs to get through the winter is a drop of fat. My name is Shashauan Pelshish. I won't carry your goddamned mountains. I am going to tickle your nostrils. And, light as a feather, I will leave for a warm country covered with butterflies. And the flies, the thousands of flies, I will swallow them!"

## Six

That night, Tshiashk arrived, dropping his heavy packet at the entrance to our camp. He immediately collapsed into silence and went to sleep. I placed his fur over him. His snoring was sweet to my ears. Shashauan and I settled down to cut and dry the product of his hunt. Bear.

Dawn lifted the fleece of the night. Its skin, fine, yellow and misty, was broken on the spruces. The rock of our clearing began to gleam; the mucous membrane of a fish slid on its pinkened waist. The winds held their breath in the distance, in the caves of Atshen, they yelped like starving dogs. The day's great mouth showed its raucous throat, yelling itself hoarse in the lukewarm air. It was keeping the stiffer cold of the north behind it. Autumn gave us one more warm day that would ripen in humidity. The sky would open over our heads like the antlers of an old moose.

I couldn't move my legs any more.

Seated on my stump, I was cutting up the mother bear. Its muscles and blood made my hands weep. It was an old mother. While carving it up, I thought about its life. I spoke to it:

"Maybe one of your grown cubs will come to eat my old carcass." I whispered my hope to her through my fingers as they ran over her muscles.

My body wanted to give itself to a child of the she-bear. It was a strange desire, not like hunger that makes the belly turn in on itself nor like thirst that burns its torch in the bottom of the throat, but rather like blueberries that the sun cracks open and that long only for a mouth foaming with fresh spittle. An irrepressible need to be dissolved in saliva.

Shashauan went and came with pieces of flesh. When the branches of the shrubs around us were covered with slices that the light and the wind would shake, she too sat down to listen to the meat that wanted to be eaten.

My granddaughter had molted. I looked at her in her new peacefulness. In the center, it was like a palpitating fire. Around the heart, a bubbling of air and blood struggled in a cage of bone. At the four corners, its members stretched to embrace, to move, and to work. Air entered it, and the bear meat also. And then this breathed. And then this wanted to swallow the world, and for it to be completely in its belly. Woman is our door. Shashauan would have her man in the middle of her in the column of the rising sun and the world would be reshaped by it.

If the meat doesn't enter the mouth, if the male organ doesn't enter the female organ, if the body doesn't enter its source, if Nitassinan doesn't enter the trap, if the landscape doesn't enter the eye, if the circumference doesn't enter the center of the circle, if the sound of the drum doesn't enter the ear, if life doesn't curl up into its environment, where will its pleasure in living come from?

\* \* \*

My life on stone now longs for the peace of the air.

"My granddaughter, it is time for you to arouse your grandfather with all your youthful beauty."

I wanted to be devoured by the night.

Today I am going to slide my eyes over Shashauan's cheeks and I will tremble with a pleasure that is new. I will let my fingers dance at the edge of her nostrils, and her smile will lift me above the mountains. Then I will set out on the adventure of the two great lakes of her soul. On a fine warm day I will stretch out there. The sun will filter its colors on her skin that is mine. Lying on the line of her lashes, I will look at the curved crystal dome of her eye. During this time, a bear will comb the blueberry barren with its claws and fill its paunch with my body, porous and saturated with pain.

Then as my body shouts its thirst for dying, I will look my granddaughter in the eyes.

"You will be my soft ground; I am so tired of the hard ground."

\* \* \*

My thoughts had prepared my words:

"Shashauan Pelshish, listen to me! You are the bird-woman of the Innu. You by yourself are a people. You know it. Never can your grandfather, nor your grandmother, nor any of your ancestors ever abandon you. Where would we go? You are a sea swallow, a tern. You are our Nitassinan."

Everything had stopped. Shashauan was breathing slowly. The whole circle of the drum seemed to have been sucked into the little hole that formed between her lips. She was a people of women in a single tattooed face. The swallow of the people.

\* \* \*

My shadow had lain down behind me. Noon was departing.

I asked my granddaughter:

"While the meat is drying, you are going to make me a shaking tent."

The lines of her face sank one by one. Shashauan wanted to say something, but she knew that it was over. There was no other possibility. My foot was already dead. An odor of decay came out of my mocassin. Sweat stood out on my face, and the slightest movement made me cry out with pain.

"I'll be more useful living than old", I told her, smiling.

Not very far away, between a few firs in a hollow, there were some small aspen of the same diameter as children's arms, straight and as supple as willow twigs. She cut them. She attached them at the top to form a cone and arranged them in a circle around my stump. I was hardened on my roots.

At the height of my knees, of my shoulders and a little above my head, she tied horizontal hoops of shining alders.

The sun had stopped above the horizon.

The structure was set up in the desired proportions. It would form a kind of vertical cocoon when the birchbark was sewn on the wooden skeleton. My granddaughter went to look for spruce roots in a marsh, then returned to sit beside me. We peeled them together.

She had trouble swallowing her saliva. A hand of anxiety was caressing her hair.

"I will be more useful living than lame."

\* \* \*

My laugh woke up Tshiashk. He got out of his furs like a young blackbird. He didn't know anything about my foot.

"What are you doing there?" he asked.

-- My son, you were gone a long time. I fell on a stone and my foot is dead. A common accident. At my age, it's too much. Your daughter became a woman on a ticipitakan. Shashauan...

-- Shashauan! he repeated.

-- Don't mock.

-- I won't abandon you, father, Tshiashk promised, as if he could change the course of time.

-- It's not about abandoning anyone, my son. It's just that winter is coming and you still have several days of walking ahead of you. I'll be more useful in my tent than lying on a birchbark stretcher pulled by two children...

-- There's no question of leaving you here, father.

-- There's no question that I stay here, my son. But listen to me a little. There will be two of you to walk and wait for the Inuit on the caribou trails. You still need me. Especially you, my son. I will stick to your behind. Son, you hunt better than a bear, better than a fox and better than a pack of wolves. You scent, you trace back, you guess, you slip into the noises and smells like a snake, but you can be crazy as a herd of caribou chased by a cloud of flies. Ears plugged by balls of pride are like swarms of wasps around a deer. If your daughter speaks, listen to her, because you might lead a whole people into an open sea simply because your ears are buzzing. Now go get some bark."

Tshiashk and his daughter were gone a long time. All the while they were gathering, they hurled old grudges at each other in a deafening silence. A herd of whistling, silenced words. Shashauan softened her heart, let her father grumble and slowly entered the new life I was preparing in front of my shaking tent.

What could I do to drive unhappiness from in front of my steps? My son, I will knock his head against a tree to break his pride. My granddaughter, I will bite her toes to make her speak.

\* \* \*

They sewed the bark.

All night long, they sang and danced around my tent. And then, there was a comma in the eye of the dawn.

They had both departed.

And silence lay down on my heart, the velvets of its warm skin spreading over my frozen bones.

# TOWARD THE EAST

## One

The glaciers that long ago crushed the mountains, tortured the summits of the North with their blades, tearing the valleys and grinding the rock, were not primeval seas that froze in place as I used to think. They were layers and layers of snow compressed beneath their own weight; a too-long history become thickness and unbearable heaviness, even for the mightiest rocks on earth.

From my shaking tent, I felt the rock endure time, I saw the sun grate the ice and husk nuts of granite. My dear mountains...

In proportion to this burden, the sun's rays seemed light and harmless, illuminated air, one might say, but when I awoke, they were containers that arms took up to cold and empty heights. The sun bailed out the lakes and rivers with its big arms of light. It threw the vapor into the sky, swelling the clouds like so many thoraxes. There was too much water and too many lakes for its taste; it wanted to touch bare rock, sit down on it.

From below, we don't see much, but the sun is a kind of titanic octopus with thousands of muscles that pull the water from the seas, condense it, crystalize it, cut it, trim it, then let it fall as rain, as snow, as powder. It sucks and aspires the seas of the South to crush the North beneath an enormous mass of ice.

Now my view is free.

To the south, the regression of the waters frees continents that the sun makes verdant. Animals slowly graze and men live on vegetables, roots and fruit. The price of this mildness: the enormous ice-sheet that cracks in winter and flows in summer. On the fringes of this thick sheet the caribou runs; it pursues the lichen in all its colors.

A long time ago, well before the glaciers, the sky was riddled with shooting stars. Some fell on the earth. They were mountains of ice, blocks of frozen water, enormous glaciers wandering among the stars. Suddenly they fell down from the sky and made straight for the earth. They softened in the burning air and exploded on the primary rock. They evaporated and fell back in waterspouts and in torrents. The sky attacked the earth with mountains of ice, and it flooded the earth. Down there, the rock was drowning.

Then the sun began to haul the water, swallow it, in order to spit it back as snow on the ice-cap of the North. I understood what the womb of the North was, the grandmother of the Inuit: a great piece of the sky's sea huddled in the cold, absorbed in a deep dream.

This dream was he, the Inuit.

So, what does it dream of, the great glacier of the North? When we know it, we will laugh louder than all the rivers of spring.

I, the owl, nothing blinds me any longer.

Gradually, to the south, the warm continents richly fed animals as well as men. A little further north, in the lands in between, food was scarcer, and men, warlike. Fear called out for chiefs. The naked beast grew furious. It was then that the east arrived from the west and covered the North with its Inuit dream.

Families were seen appearing on the glaciers; they lived on caribou, but above all on seals: they smelled like pure cool air. It was, then, inevitable that the whale, the largest marine mammal, the one whose Nitassinan embraces all the seas, desired to enter their mouths, be eaten by them, and breathe very high at last in a new, even wider and more transparent consciousness.

On the round earth, peace consists of being in harmony with one's origin so as to be capable of jumping for joy on a new earth. To know how to let ourselves be dreamed by our old grandmother so that we can tickle her nostrils, make her laugh and dance...

The ice that came from up there has been whispering for quite a long time, then, the dream of the sky and the secret of the earth. This dream and this secret live and are reproduced in all the organs of the Inuit as if his bones had become a third ear, a drum. Only the Inuit can live in the extreme regions where he has taken refuge, where he hears the cold speak in the warmth of his body.

He knows, he eats.

In those distant times, they could be glimpsed rarely, though sometimes, emerging from the white ice and coming toward the Innu like a snow goose in the paleness of a milky morning.

In the spring, when the sun breaks the ice of their sea and green water springs up from the wounds like fish blood, the Inuit slips into a light kayak and goes off in pursuit of an enormous whale. He must keep his eyes open: a whale is like a pod of porpoises in one enormous animal, it is a hill of fat and muscle, one might say, a quiet heart that gives the sea its solemn rhythm. It is not only because it is a big animal, above all it is because it goes all over the oceans and gathers them together in its memory of fat. A blue planet in a mellow brain. The Inuit pursues it. Only the whale can satisfy his need for space. Eating the flesh of the whale is like eating the sea in pieces.

The only danger comes when a voracious orca approaches a pod of seals. Almost always, its tall dorsal fin is spotted from a distance. The craft is brought to a dead stop, the Inuit silences all his body, even his breathing, and the killer whale passes beside the kayak as if it were a piece of driftwood. Nevertheless, from time to time a hunter has to be given to the orca. If not, why would the whale approach the Inuit kayaks?

The whales arrive from every sea, laden with strange stories, incredible legends, and also with a krill that has itself covered immense expanses of water. These giant whales go north in

families in the hope of entering the mouth of one of these vertiginous men full of the secret of the ice. Such large animals in such small mouths! You wouldn't have thought it! Yet doesn't the sky and all its stars enter the tiny pupil of an owl, even an owl paralyzed with age in a shaking tent? After all, isn't life the perpetual recapitulation of the infinite dispersion?

\* \* \*

As soon as we arrive at the edge of their Nitassinan, the Inuit see us. They are already touching us. They are even embracing us. They are already full of our scent. They consent then to come out of the whiteness. And we see the horizon turn yellow.

They squeeze themselves into the seal fur that imprisons their giant spirit as best it can, but their ears are always rolling in the snow and in the wind in order to carry the secret of the ice. Their hearts, their muscles, their skin collect so much space on themselves that they are forced to find relief from time to time. They travel to stretch their too-great souls on the pure snow of the Far North. They need fifteen dogs to cover enough continent with their sleds. One can see in the circle of their hoods all the waters that have come out of the sky from the mountains of ice. One has the feeling that the moon regains its life in each of their faces...

They slip between sky and earth, between the blue skin and the white skin of the drum; we hear them laughing long before we catch sight of them. They know the world and the reason of the world. If this weren't so, how could they smile at autumn, in the dying of the sun and the clouds of flies?

\* \* \*

One day, a long time ago, my granddaughter Shashauan, who must have been five or six, and I saw a moose so proud and happy with his harem that he threw himself on a snarl of hard and dense spruce as if it were a rival. He needed a little pain in order to force the excessively wide space of his happiness back toward himself. He had an irrepressible need for enemies, and this was the reason why he attacked trees.

Happiness is wide, while pleasure is narrow. He who has seen the flow of a sunset on the sea of ice, who has felt the pleasure of the earth beneath his feet, that one knows the strength that drives the Inuit to cut the icy wind with his nose and his forehead, to cut his way in the stiff air of the glaciers, to charge into the white baleen of noon. The Inuit attacks the cold to free himself from an excess of happiness.

He had to come to meet us. He was the great migration of the seas, we were the mouth of a terrible question: why had the joy of the caribou left us? Was the dream of the grandmother of ice turning into a nightmare?

## Two

It was snowing big flakes. The wind was constantly changing direction.

In the Far North, it is always like that. In front, behind, to the right, to the left, everywhere, vast ice fields sway on a sea of rocks hemmed with snowdrifts. The mists sail from one hill to another; the gaze has difficulty penetrating the landscape, but the air arrives laden with infinity. There is no respite for the wind that is no more now than a panicked herd; it divides and runs no matter how, taking its head in its hands.

The Innu who goes there searches for a fir, a birch, a tree trunk, a resistance, in order to solidify his heart; there are none. He can't decide on one direction, nor advance toward a goal, nor retreat, there are no more landmarks, his heart has already been torn by the wind, nothing hinders anything, all movements are let go into the same chaos. The Innu is an Innu no more, he is a leaf in a world of furious spirits.

And then, one day, they were there: Tshiashk and his daughter. The Innu distinguished a trail of snow, like a lock of hair undulating in the whiteness, a direction, vague, but increasingly insistent.

There, a curtain of snow smothered the form, which formed again and grew more precise.

My son Tshiashk fixed his eyes on this powder. It was still very far away. But he could make out some gray points raising the trail. If the movement weren't coming so directly toward him, Tshiashk would have imagined that it was a herd of caribou or a pack of wolves. But there wasn't the slightest hesitation in the stripes: they were rushing toward them.

Dogs gradually took shape in a distant barking. Tshiashk felt his heart shudder. He was afraid he was imagining what was coming toward him. Yes, they were dogs. The Inuit was coming, he was slicing the white fury as if it were the soft part of his own will.

Shashauan broke away from her father, placed herself beside him, and she too plunged her eyes into the white cloud.

\* \* \*

The Inuit, for his part, had seen them in a dream. He had seen two trees lost in the tundra, one red, the other green, and planted on the route of the caribou. They didn't know where they were, for a thick carpet of snow covered the furrows hollowed in the rock, and these two trees weren't able to reach the rock with their half-frozen roots.

\* \* \*

The Inuit came to them like a ray of the morning, in the very center of the plateau, right in the axis of the trembling gazes of Tshiashk and of Shashauan.

Through the barking, the two Innu heard laughter. The Inuit loosened the air growing tense around Tshiashk and Shashauan, making it explode. The winds came apart and ran away,

leaving a calm space. It was like a whip of sparks, a lot of little holes in a piece of white leather, and, on the other side, patches of a country that has had its fill. What earlier appeared to be a frightening infinity of wild winds from now on was nothing more than a kind of tent of white leather that the Inuit laugh had burst. From the other side of the dazzling bark, the sky resembled a motionless blueberry jelly in which the birds of the forest were singing.

In the house of wind, the trail of snow continued its way toward Tshiashk while the komatik halted amidst the dogs' howling. The wind blew down Tshiashk's hood. The Inuit family wasn't yet divided into individuals, it was too far away. It was just a gray cloud shimmering in the whiteness. It advanced a little further toward Tshiashk and Shashauan, who it saw in the form of two trees. Then it stopped a good distance away.

It separated from the sled and the dogs and branched out into individuals. With knives, they cut the hardened snow. They made a first circle of blocks. Next, they cut this first row with a bevelled edge that allowed them to erect the other rows in a spiral. A dome was taking shape. Strange and guttural voices scampered around them for some time after the words had been emitted. The dome of the igloo was formed with the precision of the movement of the stars around the axis of the north. And then, the little house of snow was there, a half-sphere lustrous under the heavenly vault.

The last faint glows of evening wrapped themselves in their furs behind the dome, the falling snow turned mauve, darkness encircled the Inuit's house. It was like a woman's breast between hands that didn't dare... The dogs jammed into a circular sheltered spot that had formed near the entrance hole. Two men pushed snow on the dogs, and all the family entered the vault.

Suddenly a faint light lit up the igloo. Children could be heard clucking like partridges.

A round happiness between two shaky trees! Even a sea of ice would have burst out laughing.

\* \* \*

"They're talking to us", Tshiashk whispered in Shashauan's ear.

And the two approached to within a few steps of the dome.

"What do they want to say to us?" Shashauan asked her father.

-- "I don't know."

\* \* \*

There is so much solitude around an Inuit family! It might be said that it is an ice field that they take with them, wrapped in a girl's pink skin. If two strangers suddenly ruffle this skin with their moose's breath, the family freezes, on the lookout, like a loon's neck on a lake. So imagine that the intruder has planted himself on the ice a few steps from the Inuit's ears.

Erect in their badly-sewn brown bear furs, serious as spruce trees, Tshiashk and Shashauan waited in front of the igloo's entrance. They were waiting for a sign.

The cold had slipped into their seams, it was sticking in its little thorns just about everywhere. Where a little sweat had flowed, it settled in with its harpoons. Yet that wasn't enough, it made fires and crushed its embers on patches of skin. Afterwards, it went away, taking with it all sensation. The organ became stone. The spirit of the organ was left to itself. Without matter, it wandered around the body like a dog around a tent. And the spirits mixed their dreams in the great chaos of the winds...

Inside the igloo, a mumbling was getting warmer.

"They want to tell us something", Tshiashk whispered again in Shashauan's ear.

But Tshiashk's lips were so frozen that his words were nearly inaudible.

They were laughing more and more in the warmth of the igloo.

\* \* \*

The cold bit the two trees: bear claws on mute trunks.

And the hunter's head was turning in his questions. And the hunter's daughter's head was turning in endless questions about her father's questions. And during this time, the cold was taking sustenance from these two idiots' flesh.

And then the cold began to push the back of Tshiashk, who resisted.

Then a child came out of the igloo. She was probably no older than ten. She tugged at Shashauan's mitten and disappeared into the igloo again. This produced a kind of void in my granddaughter's head. She stopped thinking and slipped behind the child. Tshiashk followed them.

In front of them, five faces smiled like moons in the red fat that slipped through the air. In the center of the igloo was a hollow stone full of oil and pieces of fat in which a horizontal wick formed a row of big eyelashes of fire: a kudlik. This made the fat in the air flicker, and the lunar faces lit up the dome.

The torsos were bare. The faces were holding back giggles. The Inuit were drying themselves amid the smell of fermented grasses coming from a caribou stomach run through by a bone and suspended over the fire. The moons were gazing fixedly at the two Innu. A few white whiskers interrupted the smile of the hunter father. Wrinkles tugged at the edges of his slanted eyes. No sign passed over this face, and yet Shashauan and Tshiashk comprehended that they had the right to observe.

Shashauan discreetly slid her gaze under the chins of the two children. The younger, a boy, was holding a puppy in his arms. He let it go. The puppy came up to Shashauan's fur and sneezed. The whole family, with the exception of the oldest child, burst out laughing. The dog went to take refuge in the arms of the girl. She pressed him against her bare chest for a

moment, then let it go off again. It ran faster than it was able to, fell, then went off to play with a strip of leather. At the other end of the strip, the mother was sewing a mocassin. An ivory amulet shone between her heavy breasts: a white fox with its back arched around the sun. In front of her, in the dim light, a young hunter was sliding a knife over an ivory tusk he was carving. He had not laughed. He did not raise his eyes.

Tshiashk succeeded as best he could in getting rid of his mask of worry, then that of embarrassment, then that of suspicion, but still didn't dare to open his mouth. He removed one mask after the other as if he were preparing a lengthy discussion. He would have smoked, but there was nothing to smoke. Shashauan had never seen her father take off masks like this. His hands trembled slightly.

Tshiashk took from his pack a bark case full of dried salmon from which the smell escaped. The eyes of the children came out of the moons still suspended in the red fat of the air. The Inuit father slowly passed his hand over the fire.

The warmth of the kudlik was good.

Tshiashk and Shashauan undressed in order to dry themselves.

The heat went to sleep, slowly lay down on their bodies like a quiet animal. It purred and circulated among these men and these women seated in this immensity, barely protected by a dome of snow which the fire reddened. Outside, the wind whistled between the teeth of the night. The muzzles of dogs smoked in the night. In the distance, quarreling furies were heard.

Tshiashk handed a slice of salmon to the hunter father. The Inuit placed it on a bone in order to heat it on the kudlik. The warmth caressed the two men, softened them, slowed their actions. The Inuit father nodded his head, cut the salmon filet in two and distributed the morsels to the children. The pieces of fish dove into the moons, lighting them up.

Tshiashk gave another slice to the hunter father. He warmed it on the kudlik for quite some time and gave it to his wife. She bit into the middle of the slice and cut the remainder with her ulu. The father caught the pieces with his mouth. And the family burst out laughing, except for the young hunter, who was sculpting in the shadows.

Tshiashk smiled, revealing a little of his heart. One could see in it a gratitude still moist and mauve, for on the other side of the wall of snow the cold was killing the winds that fled. He made a large circular gesture in order to say that he knew how to depend, that he knew that outside, the cold formed a country whose circumference no one had ever seen. He wanted to make it known that on such a sea, to have an island of upside-down snow over our heads is a refuge, and as soon as we set foot in this refuge, we are welded to our hosts by all the cold that surrounds us.

He offered a new slice to the hunter father. The man took it, heated it and gave it back to Tshiashk. The Innu understood. He handed the warm and smoking slice to the young hunter. But that one did not raise his eyes, he remained absorbed in his sculpture.

Then the hunter father raised an eye on Shashauan. She suddenly felt naked. She pressed her arms against her chest. The Inuit father smiled. To show that Shashauan was his daughter and not his wife, Tshiashk handed her the piece so that she in her turn could hand it to the young hunter. Which she did, but with too much slowness in her gesture. A trembling passed, perceptible.

The mother and the little Inuit girl could not suppress another giggle which infected everyone except for the young hunter and Shashauan. Nevertheless, the young man raised his eyes on her for a very brief moment, just enough for her to know that he was not indifferent.

### Three

Shashauan heard an owl strike its wing against the igloo.

She suddenly recognized the immensity of the circle of solitude that surrounded them. To the south, moons of walking before getting back to her people. To the north, long days of walking, no doubt, before catching sight of another Inuit family. To the east, nothing before the sea. To the west, nothing before the sea. And this great circle was guarded by the surest of sentinels: the empty and irritable cold of the Far North.

She had surely noticed that the Inuits' clothes were double: fur on the inside, fur on the outside, leather on leather sewn according to the body's proportions, with perfect care; no outer seam met an inner seam. The sealskins were so well tanned that they had the same suppleness as on the living animal. A shield against the cold. And the two Innu had only brown bearskins full of seams that the cold could bite until the blood came.

All the wind that turned in the great circle of solitude imprisoned Shashauan on a tiny island where there was only one young hunter. And he protected himself by attaching his eyes to the goddess Sedna he was sculpting, and who the Innu did not know.

Outside, spirits slid in the snow, keeping watch on the igloo-island. They packed mountains of cold against the dome of snow. The fury that had been heard in the distance now covered the immense desert of cold. A herd of wind buffalos were running all over the continent's shield. The beasts charged in every direction as if searching for obstacles to crash against. But there weren't any.

The wind-driven snow formed strips and dunes. On each side of it, the igloo accumulated a shoulder of snow and limp arms. The light of the kudlik disappeared in the layers where the warm house with the icy skin was sinking.

With a long ivory knife, the young hunter dug a tunnel to bring air back in, for all the openings were blocked. He had sensed the wind's direction, the direction of the strip of snow covering the dome, and he dug in the least thick wall. The dogs had approached the chimney that had been opened outside; they formed a single animal with several muzzles.

The young hunter squeezed into the hole, enlarging it with his body, plunged his hands into the pack and pulled out three puppies which he brought into the igloo. The mother succeeded in following her little one.

The young hunter then dug a recess in the igloo wall. The bitch crashed into it in order to feed her little ones. The noise of the wind subsided as the igloo sank. It was no longer a boiling of buffalos, but an intertwining of serpents. They formed twists as wide as mountain ranges. The sun rose and lay down in their knots, the moons rose up and broke like eggs on the summits of the wind, and all the instruments of time were distorted into long white sausages.

One might have said that time had stopped beating. It was digging its nest in a cold that left no chances.

Nothing was struggling any longer.

Here and there, in spots, the big animals formed immobile circles where what was left of time was smashed to pieces. The mother bears curled up under the snow, and with a giant paw brought their little ones back toward a nipple. In their burrows, the foxes dreamed of the dance of the mice. Under mosses covered by a great thickness of white fleece, all sorts of rodents were imagining grass and nuts. They settled down beneath the snow, convinced that now there was nothing left except to dream, for outside the wind was levelling all living things. The cold had made its own garment; they resolutely slept in it in a small eternity of images.

In his hole in the snow, beneath the languor of the wind, the Inuit shared this peace of the animals.

Around the igloo, the cold kept watch so that nothing came out. And nothing did come out.

In this lair of ivory where time, exhausted, had gone to sleep, a single young woman, a single young man on an immensity they became aware of breath by breath.

From afar, they saw the body of time, a white desert without head or arms, lying down, drowsy, sleeping in the midst of its own knots. In the middle, a hole, and, in the hole, a solitude and an exiled one, female and male from the same scattering.

## Four

The kudlik kept watch. It was imperative that it never be extinguished. In turn, each member of the Inuit family, from the youngest to the father, made sure to preserve the width of flame needed for light and warmth. At meals, the fire covered all the wick; they stripped themselves bare to the waist to let their skin be smoked. During sleep, only a small flame wavered in the middle of the darkness. The child or adult keeping watch over the fire tapped

the wick with a bone from time to time in order to smother the flames in the fat: the oil had to be conserved, the fire must not be allowed to die.

All around, time was no longer anything but an icy night, death as far as the eye could see.

When the moon went off with the stars and all the other hopes, the eyes of the child watching told stories in the shadows climbing on the reddened walls. He needed to know many stories in order to keep the dead time at a safe distance.

During the day, the two fathers did their best to get along with each other.

On the igloo's floor of snow, the pava drew the discussion. Tshiashk questioned the hunter father, Silattuq (The one who becomes wise). Silattuq answered, but with a new question. The column of answers of one was not supposed to be much higher than the other's. Outside, the winter was exhausting itself in its final combat. Both of them hoped that spring was waiting not very far away.

One might have said that the two men were pulling fish out of a hole in the ice. They had to mime a lot and laugh a long time, for misunderstandings could cling to the drawings the men made, and the fish could very well escape into the depths of silence. And when ice is the circumstance, a misunderstanding is a killer. So they had to go as slowly as a bear in its winter den. The others breathed imperceptibly around the two discussants.

Silattuq's village was established on the edge of a large bay in the North, at the mouth of the river they had gone up to hunt to the caribou, a river sometimes as wide as a lake, sometimes as narrow as the cataracts bypassed in a dogsled by taking ice and snow routes that had to be guessed at. Silattuq was now as far away from his village as Tshiashk was from his.

The Inuit drew slowly. He listened slowly. His long route made his actions indolent and widened his ears, for Tshiashk's answers were still arriving too cold.

"Brother", Silattuq thought, "the movement of the ice on the water doesn't say much about the sea. You speak to me in order to hide yourself. Let's speak with open hearts."

Silattuq spoke in plain terms. One heard his love for the village in the rubbing of the pava on the snow. Three or four times a generation, one or two families would come here to take what the caribou wished to give them. To bring it back to the village was like getting a piece of pure joy. One could feel the life palpitate in the throat of the eater, feel the running, the swimming, the rut and the giving birth, the vital foam of the deer rolling in the bleeding red of the belly's four horizons...

Every family knew the route of the caribou. The difficulty came from the fact that it was impossible to know where the caribou were in their migration. Were they already more to the west? Was it necessary to pursue them or wait for them? The best thing, then, was to arrive at the end of winter. That way, one knew that they hadn't yet passed by, that they were still to the southeast. But then it was essential to have a lot of provisions, for there was almost nothing to hunt in the winter on these snowy, rocky plateaus. If the caribou arrived too late, the family wouldn't have enough food to go back down the river and return to their own. If

spring arrived early enough, one could survive even so thanks to the fish in the lakes. The danger was great, but who could do without caribou?

"Yes, who can do without caribou?" Tshiashk repeated.

Silattuq's family had the reputation of being gifted for this hunt. Three times, Silattuq had set up camp on the route of the caribou: as a child, as a young hunter, and now. He still heard the clicking of hooves in his head. The caribou made the tour of his mind as it ran on the ends of its tapered legs. It returned season after season like awakening after night. The caribou had promised to give the Inuit several of its own. The dream had left no doubt. So Silattuq had promised: "I will bring back to the village the caribou that wander in my mind."

It was not a question of two or three animals. The trip was too long. It was necessary to organize a hunt that would permit a full harvest, for example by driving the herd toward a steep-sided river, and in this way trapping a number of individuals when they climbed back up the other side of the river. Then the rest of the summer would be spent drying the meat, preparing the fat in which they would insert the berries found in the cracks and hollows, tanning the skins, cutting wood, and making a second sled.

All this was worth the trouble and the risk. When the caribou fat melted in his mouth and its marrow sparkled on his tongue, the Inuit was like a people celebrating: a joy burst the stars on the vault of the night, he plunged into the river of his ancestors, which crosses straight through the sky of the Far North from end to end. The route of the caribou over the rocks is only the shadow of the route of the caribou in the sky. A route of milk drops, eternal and exuberant.

And Silattuq wrapped himself in the fur of the sky, he wrapped himself like a dog in the storm. His wife covered him with her naked body, he turned over on his back, the couple disappeared in the darkness, and all that was heard was the waves of the sea.

The next day Silattuq repeated: "What good is it to avoid death and postpone it, if we don't have a little caribou fat to put in our mouths?" And Tshiashk answered: "What is life, if we don't have a little caribou fat in the mind?"

They now knew these sentences in both languages, and they hovered over them like a flock of gulls over a school of fish. And yet they weren't saying the same thing.

\* \* \*

Tshiashk and Shashauan had proportionately more provisions than the Inuit family. It was agreed that they share everything, organize the hunt together, and go off again. So the caribou had to be asked to give at least ten adults and as many young ones.

But Silattuq hadn't entirely given in to the sincere give-and-take of the discussion; he remained perplexed. The dialogue, the drawings on the snow, the weight of the blizzard which didn't stop, all this fueled subterranean currents the mimes and drawings did not express. Where did these currents come from? What was their source? At what depth was the motivation occurring... Silattuq wanted to know.

Why had the Innu gone so far up the river to the north, so far from his people? Why had the bird family been so decimated? Why did the Innu believe he was regaining his strength in a meeting with the Inuit? All this was said on the floor of snow. But it wasn't just the snowfields; Tshiashk's inner sea remained a great mystery.

The fear of death is certainly a very small fear in comparison with the fear of remaining beside life, outside its strengths that penetrate each other in the great ocean of living things! For if we do not enter it, life becomes unbearable and we long for death.

Silattuq's question, "By what miracle do we struggle against death? We ought to give up everything, because outside, the cold..." And he felt in his gut life wanting to be.

Tshiashk's question: "What good is living, if living is chasing one meal after the other?" And he felt death at work everywhere around him.

Imagine a man deprived of caribou. His joy weakens, he begins to fear dying even before he has truly entered life. He says to himself: "If I don't eat caribou, what will I do to live?"

It isn't the wind and the mountains that are important: it's the color that the eyes give them. If the eyes are dull because they have been deprived of caribou for a long time, everything is dull and dead. We ask ourselves: why live? It is because life is fainting on our eyes like an eyelid, that the caribou no longer leaves the pupils to light up the snow.

This was not where Silattuq was. The caribou, with its miracle against death, was still running inside him.

You must understand it: outside, the cold kills everything. Silattuq had to know that he could trust the Innu.

Sometimes the Inuit said to himself that the Innu was simply seeking glory, that is to say a compensation for the emptiness of his life. But then, why would he and they end up in the same igloo on the route of the caribou? Why this encounter, an encounter which came from very far, from the beginning of the world? Two rivers, two veins, ancestor by ancestor down to them... Two histories thousands of years old found themselves at a crossroads, from hundreds of generations to here, to now... A crossing prepared so far in advance... In this dome of snow, in the middle of an immense blizzard, the collision of two arteries of time... Why?

They also had to look ahead, toward the future. Ahead of these intersecting roads, they saw the dealing out of too many choices, too many destinies, famines, feasts, miseries, desires, dead-ends, hopes, children... Too many possibilities, some vital, others fatal. Why did all this emerge here, in this small swelling of snow lost on the great route of the caribou? And why was he, Silattuq, plunging his eyes into the eyes of this unknown, with his children around him, and his wife, one woman for two men?

\* \* \*

One thing seemed clear: in the shield of snow and ice, each of these men had come to a crossroads.

What were the forces that had brought the Innu so far up to the north and the Inuit so far down to the south? What were the forces that had driven them to the crossroads of all the beginnings? They must have been colossal forces. But colossal in truth or in madness? Who could answer?

It could be a sea, a mountain, a cloud, a hurricane, a bear, a pack of wolves, a sacred fox or a magnificent salmon that had done the work, but it could also come from a simple crack in the mind of the Innu himself. Silattuq asked himself this question. A lake can be cold enough to whiten the lichen on its shores, and yet the water still hasn't frozen. It is still transparent, and even more transparent than ever. One sees the bottom through a great thickness of water. It is taut with cold and truth. But all it takes is for a little piece of sand to fall, and all of a sudden the water freezes. A fish trapped in this ice thinks it sees escape-routes everywhere, but this is only the reverberation of its own dying. A single impurity, for example a grain of pride in a too-silent sea, and the hunter sees nothing but his own mind crystallized in his own will. He is a dangerous man. And all the fragile beings around him are sucked into his madness.

The Inuit knew this danger as much as the Innu. Thus each family had to live periods of famine in solitude and periods of abundance in sharing. If the madness of one man suddenly appears, it must not lead to that of others. Now here, on the immense plateau of ice, when the hunter has just now lost his final shadows in the solitude, in the middle of the route of the caribou, the Innu and the Inuit find themselves in the same igloo, either as each other's salvation, or as the perdition of both of them.

Silattuq knew this from experience: a man in a great expanse of solitude can see better than anyone all around and at a height unequaled even by a snowy owl. He can see the caribou, he can release into the wind the one he has captured in his mind, he can ask the master of the caribou for a piece of its life, in order to be remade, in order to participate in the movement of waves falling back into waves. Yes, all this is possible. When he is in his place, man is lifted up and carried off in the the great movement of beings, where all is harmony between the eaten and the eater, where all is drum and dance, appearance and disappearance, like crests of waves falling back into troughs of waves.

To see is necessary for living and dying, for enjoying living and enjoying dying. But the eye is not always clear. Often it is stifled in fear, worry and night. In such an expanse, it is enough to want to leave even when we have to stay, or to want to remain even when we need to leave so that all may be lost. If he is full of himself, of his own will, of his own crystal, the eye sees what it wants to see and also what it fears seeing. And if what it fears and what it wants are hiding behind a touch of pride, madness wins out. ON the Nitassinan of ice, madness is death.

Silattuq looked Tshiashk up and down, Tshiashk looked Silattuq up and down. The drawings on the snow spoke, but as for the two men, they were trying to enter each other's inner Nitassinan. It wasn't simply a question of life and death, for assuredly we will die, it was a much more important question: a question of good life and of good death.

\* \* \*

And here Tshiashk was, no longer knowing how to open his bag to the sun in order to dry his old clothing.

From my perch, I feared for him, for Shashauan and for that Inuit family.

\* \* \*

Silattuq's wife Nuliaq stroked her children's hair as she listened to the two men's dialogue; it was like howling at the moon. She held her youngest against her bare skin, for the kudlik was flickering in too much talk. She pressed him against her. With her daughter, she played a game with stones on squares of packed snow. She was like a duck enveloping her little ones. The Innu hunter worried her.

My son, who jumped on the drum without ever pressing his cheek on the membrane of circumstances, worried her.

A man who has no woman is like a seal whose hole in the ice is blocked: unable to emerge, he suffocates under the water. So he nibbles the ice with his teeth, he breaks it with the despair of one who needs air. He's a hunter no longer, he's a man ready for everything. It's better to give him air while he's still in control of himself.

A night full of clouds, when the kudlik found it hard to redden its little drop of light, she, with her husband's approval, slipped into the Innu's furs. She plunged into the hunter's cavern. She gave him two or three good jets of air. And she went back next to her man.

"Don't trust him," she whispered in her husband's ears.

## Five

During this piece of time blocked by the cold and turning on itself in endless discussions, Shashauan and the young Inuit hunter became aware of the flattening that the storm had caused around them. The wind filled out, inflated space, eliminating everything. It was impossible to leave, impossible to return, impossible to get anywhere, impossible to even meet another family. The excess of wind had driven off all that could happen.

When the two fathers were imagining possibilities, Shashauan and the young hunter were weighing impossibilities. The wind buffaloes gored the igloo, shrieking: "Stay!" The same verb that is yelled in dogs' ears to make them give up their freedom. It was true for those in the igloo, it was true for all those who, in the distance, might have wanted to come closer. The

wind was screaming razor-sharp icicles that it spat in the ears of all the animals, it ordered them to roll up in their own warmth.

But this was not a prison: it was freedom folded down on a dome of snow, freedom compressed, connections packed into bodies, like limbs glued on a torso, arms kept close to the lungs, legs that can't flee far from the heart, agglutinations that can't be torn apart. Connections making one body out of several bodies.

The impossibility compressed around the igloo was transformed into essential connections. And these connections grew tighter mainly around the young Inuit hunter and Shashauan. Everyone, the children better than the others, understood this necessity that stuck to their lips, made them smile and want to burst out laughing in the red air.

The whole history of the Innu stopped there in front of the history of the Inuit. The two histories, for centuries and millennia coiled and erect, two snakes, one might say, entwined without tail or head, just skins brushing against each other to grasp their limits in those of the other. The woman and the man remained at a distance, immobile, but aware that their stories were going, at a precise moment, to take them and throw them one on the other.

In this desert of snow where the wind compels the dogs to put their noses under their tails, time turns over on itself. All the yesterdays and all the tomorrows are emptied. The young men who lived in Shashauan's memory, young people of the village, young people she had seen, whom she had dreamed of, all of these, the good-looking like the less good-looking, the good hunters like the lazy ones, all died of cold one after the other before arriving at the igloo. They disappeared in the raw thickness of the cold. No one would come here for a long time. And the young women seen or dreamed by the young hunter also disappeared in the snow and the cold.

All these immobilized dreams brought to birth, all these impossibilities cut into the ice one sole and unique dream, and this dream contained more and more all the other dreams; it was strong from all that was frozen, and it demanded that the young woman relax her shoulders, loosen her arms and make her chest, reddened by the kudlik, smile. And he, the young hunter, already felt his bow tremble, for there was no longer any more than one real target, the others having disappeared in the snow.

Shashauan was still handing the young hunter the same piece of salmon.

The action was still suspended there.

But the eternity had transformed it into an impossible flight, into a grace that modesty alone restrained. That is why the young hunter still hesitated. His desire wasn't ripe, but it had certainly been sown. In the immensity that had settled into Shashauan's actions, the fat melted and the faint lights were connections.. With a movement that seemed abrupt, the hunter took the meat and carried it off into the darkness where he was standing.

Obviously, neither Shashauan nor the young hunter had even glimpsed what had just happened. No matter, it was tense now in the igloo like a tunnel of flesh whose two ends could no longer escape each other.

Two histories were examining each other, from the first ancestors down to these two, the two future ancestors of a new history, a woman, a man, assailed by a languorous tingling. For just an instant, Shashauan saw a cow moose walk sluggishly across the igloo as if her back feet could no longer follow her front feet. The young hunter surely noticed the immobility that had taken hold of Shashauan's haunches and waited, like a vessel.

\* \* \*

The blizzard didn't yield. Silattuq and Tshiashk talked on the snow with the pava; Shashauan did not draw. On the contrary, she erased. She erased all she could: the memories, the clan, the South, the colored partridge, Pishou her father's best friend and his brown bear; all she could, she erased. She kept the snow floor in front of her intact. If a drawing did form, she slid her foot to make it disappear. She kept inside a small invisible circle, but it was a sturdy raft. So sturdy that it attracted everything to her.

The young hunter had told her his name: Arvik (Whale). She didn't see him, she didn't smell him, but she didn't forget him. She simply threw a line in the water; fishing at anchor, one might say, next to a sand beach. The bait of immobility. This staying put worked. The raft pitched, it snowed on the circle of water. The tints of the snow, the blues, the pinks, the beiges, the turquoises washed Shashauan's eyes. It's like that, the colors wash the forms, and a new form comes out of the invisible, as fresh as a baby being born. Shashauan no longer saw Arvik in the body he had, but in the new body she was making for him...

Time shriveled the shores of her fishing at anchor. The circle fell back on her in flakes. As if on a knife, the shadow of an owl crossed the igloo's walls and ground the shell in which she had taken refuge. Before her eyes, there was neither sky nor earth, just a single wall of gritty snow.

She no longer knew if she was sleeping, if she was dreaming, if she was waiting or if she had arrived. There, between the teeth of the sky and the teeth of the earth, between the lips of the sunset and those of the dawn, in the evening's kiss and the morning's, she had become the moist link, the thread of saliva, the tongue that slides between the lips of the day and those of the night. Time passed too slowly, and the igloo was piling up dangerously over its occupants.

Outside, the wind whistled in the dense air, it pushed on one mass, then on another. The air was being moved by enormous animals, some icy, the others warm or mild. The giant air masses struggled head against head like musk-oxen.

In the igloo, the air didn't budge. The kudlik spat its masses of red light, which turned green as it fell on the snow. In a mass of suspended light, the mother was separating the dried fish into equal mouthfuls, she was feeding her two little sparrowhawks, and her eyes cut blocks

of snow. Life entered and departed through short sleeps, she never went too far from the fire because the weather outside was still glacial. On Shashauan's raft, Nuliaq and her children were playing knives with their sparrowhawk eyes. Laughs sparkled at the points of the blades. Now, Shashauan wanted this to happen to her; she wanted to play the same game.

During the day, when the kudlik threw lumps of heat on backs and chests, the air resembled lard. It ran over the muscles and made them supple.

Immobility has the power to release sensations, which are detached from the mind, wander, and reshape the world any which way. Time amuses itself in the compound of snows, while outside, it rips off heads.

\* \* \*

The storm was finally sated. It wanted to sleep.

Outside, Arvik had dug a long trench in the snow. The rock wasn't far underneath. He had meticulously stripped off the lichen. He had brushed it with the hairy back of his mitten, taking care not to damage it. On the caribou trails, he identified the time of their latest passage and the health of the herd. "They are numerous," he sang in his mind, for he knew already that there were several mouths to feed on the other side of the present, in the double doors of the near future: little sparrowhawks with their mouths open and crying around a mother and her nest of snow.

While digging, he had found some stones. He had put a large flat one on the snow to sit down on. At the proper distance, he had placed a pointed stone where the sun rose and another where it set. Every day, he placed one stone at the sunrise and another at the sunset. The stones got further and further away from each other. The days were getting longer. He believed that spring was near, very close to the heart.

Arvik was the only one to go out. Silattuq watched the others, making sure that they remained in the igloo.

The young Inuit slipped through the wind. He didn't disturb the scents, he didn't even touch the great solitude that floated around the igloo, he made no noise, and he held his thoughts close around him. In this way, the wolves would not be alerted. They would take their position naturally. We would hear them announce the caribou's arrival. Soon it would be possible to perceive their silence between the howls of the wolves.

\* \* \*

By persistently scraping the skin of her mind, Shashauan emptied it, and the four winds entered through every orifice. The circle of snow around her feet was still smooth. Above her head, the roof of snow had thickened, the wind had banked the house. Shashauan's eyes ended up falling on the wall of snow. On the igloo's dome she saw a livid guano slipping, veined with spruce gum and caribou sinews. The roof had exploded. The wall of guano formed a vertical tube in which her blood was beating. Shouts were stifled in that swollen throat. A wide, thick, and bloody pain sprang up from the bottom, from where breath was

born. The pain widened the throat of that vertical serpent, time. A deep pain she didn't know. The lips wanted to open, but only shook.

Her body was nothing any longer but a tube connecting her sex to her mouth. A tube between two mouths, and it was all the entrails of the earth, the groaning of caverns, the thunder of volcanos, the snoring of the depths that wanted to pass through her.

Nuliaq heard the breathlessness in the young Innu's throat. The Inuit mother had returned from her brief visit to Tshiashk's bed, one night only, in order to find out what he was hiding in his pride. She still had his odor rising from her belly and cooling on her bare chest. And she too had pain. A pain she didn't completely understand, which didn't stop with disgust, which covered more than disgust. There was also her woman's pain, this upsurge from the bottom of the earth that makes babies and futures with the body's mucous membranes.

The immobility of the two women had united them in the same tube, a vertical tunnel connecting the entrails of the earth to those of the sky. And from this tube forms wanted to spring forth. The fulmar, the sparrow and the narwhal, the snowy owl, the ermine and the musk-ox, the wolverine, the Canada goose and the eider -- all these were seen being born. Heads of all kinds, eyes that pierce, beaks that swallow.

\* \* \*

One evening, in the red of the flames, Nuliaq fixed her lunar face on Shashauan's. Two moons looked at each other in the same granular cave, and lights rose out of the depths. Nuliaq let Shashauan's moan form in her throat: the groaning of a seal coming from a thick rock.

Shashauan let the Inuit mother liberate her moaning, liberate the moaning that had formed in the clots of her menstrual blood, there where the depth of her sex joined the entrails of the earth.

Then Nuliaq answered her.

Now the two walruses were heard, face to face, delivering their cries which tore the thick morning air with their guttural complaint.

Between the earth and the Inuit is the Inuit woman. When you hear the emptiness of the depths welling up, its moan and its desire, and all the earth's crust resounding in its drum, your bones begin to rumble, your skull responds, and your shoulders are put out of joint in the echo of the mountains. Every word you know runs like a single cloud of white geese. And the sacred word that forms the world swells under their wings.

\* \* \*

Some days before Nuliaq and Shashauan sang, Silattuq had recounted this legend: at the beginning of the world, a man had promised his daughter, Sedna, to a man she didn't want. This father was named Agunta. He took his daughter into his umiak, a large rowboat that

kept an even keel on the surface of the water as well as on the surface of the sky. It makes man horizontal, a separator, and impermeable. The fiancé, who was reputed to be a shaman, awaited his betrothed on an island surrounded by white whales. On her father's umiak, Sedna was moaning, for desire for another man was rising from her belly. All women want another man, taller, broader, stronger, more powerful than the one promised them. Sedna stopped suppressing her desire: the sea began to tremble. The waves formed cones that exploded in the air. The sea boiled, panted, heaved. Believing that the storm was coming from the shaman's jealousy, Agunta, to appease him, threw his daughter into the icy water as a sacrifice. But, burning with desire, the young woman did not die, she clung to the side of the umiak. Agunta, fearing for his life, struck his daughter's fingers to the point of cutting them off. The fingers stopped being afraid of the depths; they sank in the sea taking with them all the bitterness and anger of Sedna's desire. The fingers, freed from all the fears that force man to keep to the surface, formed fish, seals, walruses, whales and all the travelers of the depths, all those whose life consists of feeling and expressing the inner abyss. But Sedna's desire, freed from her fingers, started to blow in the storm even stronger. And one day, a man will dare to enter her storm in order to be devoured and reborn. No one knows who this man is. But, even if he is the most distant of all our descendents, he is already our first ancestor.

The fear of man in regard to woman resembles that of the sailor who doesn't know how to swim, dive, or breathe in the water. So he trembles on his umiak, he is flattened by the sky that crushes him on the sea, and yet he is unable to resist the vertigo of the depths of the water and the sky. He wants to enter the sacred tunnel, become the woman's caribou, and come out new, a son of sky and earth, to sing the white earth.

\* \* \*

From high on my stump, as I listened to the two women's guttural jousting, I began to understand what an Inuit woman was. I began to understand the mystery of Sedna, the mystery of the sea and of desire, and why man runs on the ice between seal holes, throwing his harpoon into all kinds of flesh, breaking hearts on the snow, breaking his own heart, wanting to spread his blood on the snow to make it fertile. I heard, vaguely, the song of the white earth.

\* \* \*

Because of the snow transported by the storm, the igloo's walls resembled whale fat, a thickness of fat that contorted the song of the women over the kudlik and turned it upside down. The igloo kept the two women's ventral moan in its womb. Facing each other, they made the vertical tube vibrate, the tube that propelled the moan of the ocean's depths into the rarified air of the moon.

While Arvik was outside crawling over the lichen to learn the position of the caribou, while Silattuq and Tshiashk were mutually measuring the risks of their encounter and pacing in all

sorts of hesitations, the mother and the young woman were allowing the columns connecting the whales to the stars to tremble inside them.

Throat songs make time stumble in its course; it suddenly stands up like a birch. The enormous waiting of the stone, a waiting of several thousand seasons, piles up on the bank of time. The bare rock has awaited its fertilization for too long. To the north, it still waits. Its desire is unbearable. All the peoples of plants and animals arise from its throat.

\* \* \*

Arvik returned in the middle of the night. The serpent of his silence awoke Shashauan. He lay down. But he had smelled the female warmth in the Innu girl's odor.

The moment approached, it was there, half-open in the night that was stretching out. Herds were climbing up Shashauan's thighs and there was no mistaking them. Discreet and silent, the little Inuit girl keeping the fire remained plunged in her dreams.

Sedna invited herself into the igloo and pulled on Shashauan's fur. She pulled so hard that the fur slid on to the snow, bringing the Innu girl toward the odor of the man. She was now next to him. She looked at that man, her man -- for there wasn't any other in all the immensity of the shield of stone and ice --, and she found him handsome, peaceful, powerful. His umiak seemed sturdy and imperishable. She wanted to cling to this floating surface, feel the side of the craft on the water. For a moment, she succeeded. It is so sweet to end up on the surface of males, to lose depth for a moment, to lose for an instant the feeling of the infinite, in order to grasp stone shoulders, a man.

Arvik stared at her with his moose eyes; he was almost laughing. The glimmer of the flames had stopped on the slant of his eyelids. His iris: a circle of spruce in a violet twilight, one might say. Shashauan still clung to his boat. And then she found herself lying down inside it.

The arms, the mouth, the legs, all her body knew what to do. She was surprised. She didn't have to think up anything. All of her body was a throat song, the song of the world.

The furs undulated in the darkness. Slowly. The flame wavered before the eyes of the little girl watching the kudlik. Nuliaq smiled, squeezing her chest against Silattuq's back. Outside, spring could retreat no longer. Icicles were hanging from the sky. The stars oozed drops of warmth.

The night was long, silent and windless. When the kudlik began to smile on the morning with its great blade of fire, Tshiashk was no longer there.

## Six

My son had been built of stone. There was mountain in his shoulders, there was schist on his chest, big flows of granite knotted his thighs. He rose from the earth like the chimney of a volcano. His massive back continued into his neck and the whole mountain fitted into his

head. His neck was as wide as his skull. Whatever the weight attached to his headband, he could lift the load. His head itself was a stone without any fissure. If he had an idea, it became as rigid as a water gourd abandoned in the dead of winter. Everything grew brittle at his contact, even the leather of the firmament.

He held the sky over his head with his right hand while he slipped his left hand into the parcels of the forest. The trees broke with a single blow of his stone axe, and he grabbed game like a child picks flowers. He had never come back from a hunt empty-handed. Before him, space did not exist, except as a full basket. He pulled on the scents like pulling on the cord of a harpoon, and the animal came of its own volition to spare itself the pain. All Nitassinan was never anything but his own body that he was bringing back to himself, meat by meat, bone by bone. The holes in his skull -- mouth, nostrils, ears -- were just ravines where everything poured back on him.

But in him, silence was killed by the falling of things into the abyss. He heard shouting, even when there was total quiet.

As for eyes, he didn't have any: there was just the extension of his will. His gaze went off, but didn't come back. He fabricated plans. Tshiashk saw what he wanted, and what he didn't want, he didn't know how to see. He walked in a space that was always as dense as water about to freeze, he besieged the air and the sky, the water and the earth. For him, to advance was to cut through, and he didn't understand those who remained behind the world's flesh, broken but now healed, those who caressed the world as they ran on its soft and silent skin.

When he was at the seashore, the gulls flew off in fear. He hacked at the air with the knife of his wings, he glided on the layers of fat of the heavens, sometimes very high, sometimes skimming the water.

Tshiashk, the seagull.

He sliced the world in full flight. All the fat skin that covered the sea was divided, the shreds hung in the fog and he dove into the fissures, went into the meat of the water like a harpoon, tearing big pieces of fish out of it.

Below, canoes tossed in the anger of the sea, they capsized, sweeping men and gear away. But he, Tshiashk, remained imprisoned in his single seagull's will.

The problem is that he had never noticed the price of this hunt, behind which, unavoidably, the world was forced to reshape itself. Tshiashk looked behind him: everything was quiet and enclosed again. He looked ahead of him: everything offered itself like a woman who didn't know how to say no. In the village, they wept at his triumph, ate till they were bursting, ate for the dead and for Tshiashk's health. He prolonged some lives while cutting others short, and no one could calculate, they knew, they wept.

His mother hadn't pushed him out of her womb: he tore himself out of her a moon before his time. Then he crawled on his mother's belly to the nipple, which he wanted to bite.

We loved him so much... He cut up his life like meat and served it to our veins, to our nerves and to our hearts. The straps connecting us to him tore our skin from inside.

It might be said in his defense that he left for the hunt alone. The others followed. If he went faster, the others went faster. If he slowed down, the others slowed down. If he went along a precipice, he took the right, the others fell on the left.

It was out of instinct that I accepted Messenak's proposition to lead him into the Far North, so that the Inuit and his great icefield of solitude would come to meet him, then trim the stone of his being, polish it. Only a man of the North, accustomed to the hard air, to the brittle water, to the crystalline cold, could slide his round knife into the cracks, break the corners and file the projections.

\* \* \*

He should have understood. The most important thing is not to penetrate the air, the water and the forest in order to gobble up big pieces of flesh and life before ending up in the earth's great stomach oneself. These heavy swells that eat each other, this is the basic movement, a way, simply, of avoiding the eternity of one form, but this is still not the true life.

We must look more attentively. The water of a wave doesn't change its position on the sea. The wave, yes, but not the water of the wave. A boat rises and descends without following the wave, for the water is immobile while the wave goes freely away without having to carry the weight of the water. To understand this is to enter the bird's element.

It is simply through the wave of physics that the wave of water knows the width of the sea and also its length, but the depth and freedom of the sky do not move. The waves of physics whisper the sea's proportions to each other, but the heart of the sea, the heart of the sky, the one and only heart of all the spaces doesn't whisper: it listens, it savors.

A lesson is hidden in this movement: waves keep the sense of proportions only if they listen to the wave of physics and savor immobility. This is the important thing: to listen to the joy of the wave of physics, to let the forms be born and die in peace, to become the flavor of the world.

The one who wants to keep in his mouth, between his teeth, the entire sprawling animal of the sea, will vomit. Conversely, the one who remains in his heart becomes the quivering container of the great tides of the night and of the day.

Caress without biting. Preserve the sense of proportions. Keep the peace.

Peace creates no sensational emotion. It is the sea of all true feelings. This is why a hunter who has lost peace is a danger for the whole population, and it is the duty of the father to bring this dangerous child to the North before he is chief of the village.

\* \* \*

Silattuq had welcomed Tshiashk; the Inuit had given, the Innu had taken. A mother and a daughter had sung in the undulation of the world: throat song, song of seals and floating ice. But Tshiashk had listened with the aim of winning; therefore he was lost.

While Silattuq was speaking, Tshiashk was drawing up his strategy. He kept his idea secret, hardening like water in the cold. He had his plan, his plan possessed him, a plan just as indestructible as all his other plans. A plan which couldn't fail, for when the mouth asks the hand to come to it, the hand goes there, and that's it. And this is the whole tragedy of the man: his body follows his will, while the opposite is what is necessary.

He went out at night while the Inuit family grew sluggish in the smell of Arvik and of Shashauan. He knew that they were living it up, already intoxicated by the undulation of the bait. While Silattuq was making his fingers laugh on his wife's belly, Arvik was sliding a white goose feather over Shashauan's breasts. Tshiashk was in agreement, he would authorize the marriage; he wanted to bring the wedding present, good caribou meat, bones, marrow.

He wanted this now. And what he wanted now had taken hold of him, as in the winter when the new ice takes hold of a fish remaining in the upper layers of the water: the freeze imprisons it, fixes it in its idea, and it becomes crystal, it is itself reflected on all the mirrors of the ice. Perhaps there are no other ways of ruining one's own life and those of others.

Barely outside, already he had identified his way. In an instant, he had engraved in his vivid memory the subtle topography of the dunes and snowdrifts. And the dark rocks Arvik had stared at, and all these straight lines, unseen but connecting the peaks in a transparent mind, all this was engraved on the stone of his head.

He followed the moon's ray, for he saw a quite high hill in the path of the light. He walked until morning, then until noon. He arrived at the summit. The sky's fire warmed the snow, which was softening. Tufts of dried grasses emerged from the blisters the warmth had burst. The snow smelled of foxes. Clouds of tiny flies were eating the snow-stars.

Soon tufts of lichen would be rolling on the remnants of winter. The greens and the yellows, the mauves and the violets of the lichen were going to absorb the sun's heat and enlarge their holes in the snow. A few squat and prickly spruces were going to shed their scales. The wet rocks, gray and black, were going to emerge from the belly of the earth and drink great gulps of water. All that had been kept from rotting was going to liberate its gas. All that had been kept from sprouting was going to liberate its perfume. And the rotten odors were going to frighten the fresh odors, and the fresh odors were going to drive out the rotten odors. They would pursue each other, they would tickle each other, and everything would burst out laughing. Soon...

But not now.

Just as he had predicted, Tshiashk smelled wolf droppings; he found a good amount of it thawed out between the tufts of grass. He crushed the droppings on his bear fur, on his forehead and on his cheeks. He rolled in it. Night arrived. He danced, he howled, he

embodied the wolf coming out of his own inner well. He let himself be possessed by it. His nose danced in the scents.

At one point, he heard a shrew scurrying under the snow; it stopped and nibbled the hard grass. The scent made its way through the snow dissolving in the mild air. Tshiashk went silently ahead on all fours, which he moved two by two like a lizard's, then he froze completely. His ears moved independently of each other, driven by clouds of small noises. His nostrils swelled, filtered, palpitated like butterflies on flowers.

Quick as a flash, he plunged the knife and his whole hand into the snow. The shrew barely escaped him. But it had confirmed him as a wolf.

"You hear, you smell, you dive", it had said in his ear before fleeing.

He sat down, knees against his chest, nose lifted toward the moon. He howled.

The echo of a distant cold responded, but he didn't hear it. There were, nevertheless, dense pools in the silence, too dense not to be suppressed sound. He detected a wolf pack's presence. Only when Tshiashk inhaled did it advance. As soon as he exhaled, it stopped. But he had sharpened his hearing, felt the pools of silence, touched the thoughts of the wolves. Paws crushed the silence. A smell of wet dog was approaching. It was a female. She had scented him. He heard her sniffing.

The pack stayed behind the female. Tshiashk let a little fear slip over his skin. The scent of his fear went off into the airwaves, and the female riveted her muzzle to it. The scent returned toward the hunter with the she-wolf, who believed she was smelling a male, and more than that, a wolf, a stranger, but smelling also of the carcass of an animal she didn't know. And he, Tshiashk, was holding his knife in his clenched fist.

Fangs came out of the night in a scarcely perceptible sniffing. Tshiashk didn't budge. The female lifted her chops to catch a few drops of scent. She stretched her neck.

A knife had already passed through it. The pack scattered with the female's final moan.

\* \* \*

Tshiashk cut the animal open and ate its liver, and all the bitterness of its bile along with it. He cut its heart into thin slices and chewed them slowly. All day long, he wolfed it all down without forgetting a thing, especially not the marrow in the long bones and the gelatin of the brain. From its claws and fangs, he made a collar.

By the evening of the third day, Tshiashk was no longer a seagull, but a wolf.

He danced, danced to the point of falling into a deep trance. His stomach stabbed him with bouts of dizziness. He turned and turned again in the hoop of his exhilaration. Catapulted from its sling, his spirit had joined the fleeing pack. He moved with it on the path of the caribou.

After five days of walking, the pack found itself next to a family of caribou. A mother was digging in the snow with her hoof to help her little one. Heedless, he rummaged between her legs, hammered her udder and sucked. The mother let him do it. The others pivoted their ears. All the mother heard was her little one's sucking. She closed her eyes and enjoyed it.

"She's not going to abandon him", Tshiashk thought.

The wolf pack understood this at the same time as the hunter: the mother would hesitate to leave her little one. Three wolves made a big circle to drive the caribou family toward Tshiashk, and another big male positioned himself beside the hunter. The two waited in the same shaded spot. Tshiashk threw his harpoon on the mother and his knife on the wolf. The two fell instantly. The mother got up and ran away, but the harpoon's cord was attached to a large stone: when she reached the end of it, the shock was so searing that a big piece of lung was torn from her ribs. The baby caribou moaned next to her, licking her blood. The big male ran, but he already had a knife in the throat. He collapsed on the hunter's feet. Tshiashk strangled the little one.

Seeing the betrayal, the three other wolves, furious, rushed at the hunter. He ran them through with his spear. Bitten in the arm, exhausted, but still standing, Tshiashk hurled a great howl in the igloo's direction.

In the distance, the herd of caribou fled in an earthquake.

Still solid on his pool of blood, Tshiashk hurled another howl. Then he burst out laughing in the great walls of his pride.

\* \* \*

The winter wasn't dead.

Tshiashk ate the liver and the heart of the mother caribou and its little one. He cut up the meat and freed the bones. The packet he had to carry was enormous. The weight pulled with all its force on the wide head strap. In spite of everything, Tshiashk carried the load. He raised it above the mounds of stones and the carcasses of ice. He went forward. But the thaw and refreezing had sharpened the remains of the snow. The ice played sword with the hunter's feet.

Obviously, all this was happening beneath him as in an underbrush being trampled, for his head was too high, the birds bumped into it; no one could tell that the man was sinking. One heard the sound of the sea and smelled kelp. The cold, for its part, mocked the loftiness of the witness: it was returning from a short sleep, it was stretching, it was hungry. It was in no hurry, it had its dwarfs working for it, with their blue-lashed whips, their cut stone harpoons, their arrows with points of ice.

Tshiashk cut a path in the pleasures of his pain. He was so happy! He imagined the Inuit children eating greedily. Especially the little girl, who was often hungry. And they, the parents, didn't do anything. Waiting. Tshiashk made up his smile, and his smile demolished

all the moons forming in his mind. Luminous patches appeared before his eyes. And the little Inuit boy was hungry too. And the big softie, the young hunter... Good! He would learn. Tshiashk was going to teach him something. He might be able to fish, perhaps, or trap partridges in snares... Shashauan would do what a cow moose knows how to do in the trembling hours of her nature, but it's her father who would make the fat run in her memory, it's her father who would remain the man... And the Inuit mother, she was nice, helpful. She knew what to do, you could sleep with her fine, but she was starting to lack milk, and her poor husband, quiet and nice, didn't bring in anything..

Tshiashk advanced in his dream, though under torture. What the cold tore out of him, he rebuilt with the materials of his dream.

Ah, how happy he was!

He shook his own flesh from his back like a caribou shakes itself after a long journey. He spattered blood around him. The load was light, more and more light, as if the cold had put its shoulder under the packet of meat and lifted and pulled along with him. It was now all the air itself that was carrying the man and his packet.

\* \* \*

"Ah son, come into my arms. If only you knew what I see when I look at you! If only you saw yourself for a single moment in your father's eyes! But you can't. You see yourself with your own eyes. That is your tragedy. Come! I'm going to carry you. You're coming home after a very hard journey. Rest. Put your packet down. There you are at last. I've been waiting for you for such a long time!

-- But papa, how did you get here?

-- I followed you. I have always enjoyed following you. Watching you play like that in the snow has always been my greatest pleasure.

-- And mama?

-- She's coming. Always a little late. A duck, she's a duck. But don't worry: her throat is always full of fish. So, show me your meat! It's good. Tender. A female. And the fat... Surprising for the season. Lots of fat. What! You brought back the long bones? They're wonderful!"

My son deposited his packet in front of the wigwam and collapsed on the fur of his bed. Trembling around the tent were iris, and his snoring made them laugh. The sun had shed its white fleece; a collar was blazing on the horizon.

How good it was to sleep in the imagined warmth of his village and his father's actual arms.

## Seven

That night, while he was watching the kudlik, Silattuq let the fire smile. He was sitting down, his legs pulled up to his chin.

Like the fire, he stood up suddenly. His spine reared up like a harpoon. The lamp inside him lit up his face, and the darkness retreated behind him. Silattuq: the Inuit who would be wise.

His spirit had sniffed out something, it had returned like a wind that enters the flames, alert and fiery. He had touched one of the fringes of grandmother North. It was far away, it was high, but it was undeniable.

Silattuq went out of the igloo and stood still.

The wind was coming from the west in very light gusts. A sheet of scent danced furtively in the Inuit's nose and went off again in the direction of the north wind. In the sky in the east, a bluish tide was rising over the dense gravel of the darkness. Still very distant, something was crawling in the grit of the sky. A rustling passed over the Inuit's head.

A whip of cold snapped on Silattuq's webbed cheeks, and its wrinkles widened with hope. For a moment, his nose lost all power of smell. But the air grew milder, and the scent let itself be recognized. In the distance, in the direction of that scent, the silence crackled with impatience as it waited for the dawn. The blue tide grew lighter in the east. Shadows of wings licked the fragments of ice.

Silattuq went back into the igloo and pulled his son away from Shashauan's ardors.

And I was laughing, because Arvik's eyes were still asleep on his cheeks like little rabbits on their mother's belly. His head staggered on his shoulders. Shashauan, tucked into her dream, was holding on to his thigh.

"Geese", Silattuq whispered in his son's ear.

Arvik pulled himself loose and dashed outside. Naked, standing erect, he was waiting for a sign. He had already shot his ears into the heights. They ran against the wind and returned full of noises. There was cheeping in that direction, straight ahead, in the north wind.

He went back in and got dressed. Shashauan felt a little sperm running on her thigh; the smell of it finally woke her up. The memory of her night put up some resistance in her arms; she didn't want to let it go. The night had passed like a long dream, as long as a whole spring, when the moss opens under the hooves of the moose, the moist sphagnum parts to let the earth breathe and hunger stops soliciting legs and hands. When the earth oozes a black water and all the tiny flowers of the marsh start to melt on the tongue of the female...

But when Shashauan saw Arvik enter, the morning cold bit into her exposed shoulders. She wanted to burrow into her fur again, but the two children were already skipping around her.

Then a scraper crossed her vision, still imprisoned in her eyelids. In front of her was just a pale and naked piece of leather with a crack of blood across it. Her heart leaped. A cold sweat ran on her chest. She heard the *a-bonk* of the geese. Her eyes opened. Arvik hadn't finished pulling up his pants. Shashauan felt death returning from the hunt.

I murmured in her ear: "Don't worry, girl. Tshiashk always comes back from a hunt, and never empty-handed."

Her heart grew calm, but didn't want to abandon the roaming vestiges of death. Shashauan got dressed and went out with the others.

On the horizon, a flock of Canada geese stood out against the morning.

\* \* \*

"Ho! Look, down there: men!" some of the geese cackled.

Two hunters, two women, two children were busily moving around a dome of snow, at a day's flight from the coast, on the caribou trail.

"A sign of spring," one goose joked.

-- They're lost", another replied with a nervous laugh.

There was a moment of silence, then a moment of sadness. The geese tried to imagine the trip toward the coast for two-legged creatures so destitute. Days and days to do the equivalent of one little day of flying.

The discussion resumed:

"It must be nature's only mistake.

-- Naked animals who need the skins of others.

-- Hands without claws they have to arm with sticks and with cut stones.

-- Mediocre runners, a third of a caribou's speed, mediocre jumpers, a tenth of a deer's leap, shortsighted eyes, a hundredth of a falcon's gaze, a dull nose, a thousandth of a dog's, thick eardrums, muscles of straw, a community life of disputes and hypocrisy, and above all this dizziness in the face of the abyss that makes them run after death."

Their peeping filled the air as it whistled under their wings. The gray air whitened in front of them as they opened the lips of the horizon. But, down there, darkness stained men. It was as if there were indefinite cracks. One goose mustered up his strength and asked a friend who was tarrying at the back of the flock:

"Wise One, tell us what they're doing among us. One might say that they were the embryo of an animal that didn't succeed in finding either its form, or its place, or its joy!

-- You're not completely wrong, the Wise One said as he looked down at the family reaching out their arms toward them as if toward saviors. It is probably an in-between species, transitional beings, something like the lizard, whose wings are still too short to fly, or the

serpent, who still drags the two legs of its ancestors, or else a fish that leaves the water and crawls on its fins before it has legs...

-- But why don't they succeed at anything? With big albatross wings, they could fly. With long caribou legs, they could run. With good fangs, they could hunt without any equipment. With a good brain, they could organize themselves together and help each other. It's not right. A species that is put together right always has to sacrifice a little of itself in order to save them. Will we always have to do it? What is there to gain by passing through their digestive tract?"

And the beginning of a laugh shook the flock of geese. Wise One waited for silence, then defied his male and female colleagues:

"I think we'll have to forget them. *Plop!* Behinds on the ground. And then, universal peace."

This time, the flock began to laugh heartily. Zigzags rocked the V-formation. And then there was another moment of sadness and another moment of compassion. Then a kind of tenderness passed through the flock: the biped's skin is soft and his stupid intelligence is touching. They are like lost children. They play with all sorts of little things without ever perceiving the gravity of their actions. They simply ask to be adopted, either by the caribou, or by a good-sized bird...

In the silence, one goose did not remain insensitive.

"Tell us, Wise One. Tell us something that you truly believe. For everywhere we turn our eyes, everything is at its maximum according to its context. For example, the void between the stars is at its maximum of void so that the stars can be at their maximum brightness. If I point my beak toward a little stone down there, let's say the pink one, you see it, it is crossed by a blue vein. That stone is at its best and is doing its best. When it can feed a lichen, it will do it; when the ice will have broken it into small enough pieces, it will end up in the crop of a bird, or in a plant. It has always been at the best of its being. When it was only the dust of a sun, it could have been no matter what. Now, it has an enormous history, with a thousand memories of the sun, of minerals, of plants and animals. And it became this, and then it became that, always at the best that the circumstances permitted. Everywhere in this world, there is only the sparkling of the same dust that is a rock here, a lichen there, further away a caribou, or even an ermine. So if everything can enjoy being everything, but one thing at a time, why does man always lag behind in this hesitation that keeps him separated from everything?"

And the silence stopped laughing and took a solemn turn.

The Wise One spoke:

"Oh! Pretentious geese whose language is limited to thirteen distinct peeps. I find you a little too crowded on your great flying wings. In one day of flying in good weather and a favorable wind, we pass from winter to spring, then from spring to summer. Down there, we see the world wade in a serenity of colors, the field mice scurry from one hole to another,

and the grass blazing in yellow and mauve layers. From here, everything is beautiful. And the peoples down there can see this tear of joy frozen at the point of our eyes. From where we are, everything is equal. The little pink rock has been a little bit everything: dust around the sun, bone in the caribou, sap in the plant, salt in the sea. A powerful journey. All has been all and will be all. Even you who pity man, you will one day be, and perhaps this very day, in his stomach hoping to emerge from the edge of his empty eye. I wish for you that young woman there, who hides her worry badly and whose eyes reveal that she is crammed with sperm. It is not what things are that is important. For all is all. Animal or stone, man or goose, what's the difference? One whose memory has been severed finds himself crushed between two sections of wall. Man has been severed by the blade of his consciousness. He is there, crushed, a small package of bone and flesh, walled up in a brief instant he miserably displaces from one hour to the other. We geese will have one day done everything. So we will have been everything. That's what you believe. But the truth is that we are and will be again a thousand times nothing, as much nothing as a night without sound waiting for the dawn. For alone, nothing can become everything. But you, my friend the goose, can you feel that? Can you constitute yourself as the feeling of all that? That young woman there, who is not any more something than the little pink stone I spoke of a little while ago, she, she can. It is all of her inconceivable weakness. It is all of her inconceivable strength. I leave you with a simple piece of advice: when you are her flesh, avoid the narrowmindedness you have just shown. Her feeling has no angle nor any limit. If her consciousness has severed her vital memory and her joyful unity, it is in order to surface above herself and finally breathe the perfume of all that is and will be. And she keeps this in her belly, she makes it the material for a child."

These words precipitated in the goose who was listening, and in some of his friends, an irresistible desire to descend a little lower.

Then they saw what seemed to be a statue of ice. It was an Innu covered in frost, my son, standing up with a strap across his forehead. The strap was so deeply dug into his skin that drops of blood stood out on the ends of his hair and fell like crimson parings on the snow. In his packet, the smell of caribou fat, a smell overwhelmingly attractive for a goose.

\* \* \*

The careless geese were riddled with arrows. Bows still at the ends of their arms, Silattuq and Arvik stood paralyzed before the statue of ice: Tshiashk.

On the Innu hunter's frozen specter, the two Inuit hunters had broken the dream of the geese. The birds' corpses were lying in front of a statue of ice. Flows of blood caught the gazes of Silattuq and his son Arvik. They refused to notice this fate, carved from a pride they knew only too well. Tshiashk was there in front of them, frozen to death. And the bodies of three careless geese formed a carpet of feathers in front of the hunter's statue.

Shashuan let out a wolf's howl. Arvik's eyes clung with both hands to the blood-flows tensing in the cold.

## Eight

Silattuq's family advanced laboriously, stumbled on the ice, held the dogs in check, got stuck in the melting ice, got back out, started out again.

From now on, the Innu was just a memory.

The Inuit family, disturbed and vexed, had undertaken its return to the North. It climbed a promontory of icy rocks along a winding knife-edged ridge with shaky strata, and the sled stopped.

Motionless, the family's five pairs of eyes gazed at the plateau they had just left. The dogs were panting, firmly set in their hunger.

In front of them in the distance, the Innu in a single being: Shashauan.

What a separation, the North returns to the north, the South to the south.

My granddaughter was tottering in the middle of a great drum of solitude.

Her sorrow made her go down and then climb up again in a dry wash of bare rocks connecting the plateau to an ice-free gorge. She sailed from high to low in her boat of pain, going up and down according to the line of the horizon. She was following the wave of her suffering.

On the low ground, she cut centuries-old tree trunks and rough branches; on the high ground, she constructed a wooden platform for her father. A colossal task which the pain diminished.

Some trees that grow as slowly as stones bristle with sharp hooks that resist the axe and scream out names at it. Shashauan broke her hands on them. She had to search for good nodules of flint or quartzite, trim them, then break them on the trees. When the logs were ready and the short stakes driven into the hardened snow, she pulled out the roots, cleaned them and used them to tie up her platform. Using branches, she built an approach ramp.

Next, she carefully washed her father's body. She cut off one of his fingers and cleaned the bone, which she added to her collar of wolf teeth. Then she rolled the body along the ramp and hoisted it on to its wooden bed, which was only half a man's height.

Four days and three nights of hard work. She panted, stuck in her fatigue.

Carried along in her ship of pain, she hadn't seen the Inuit family in the distance. But the Inuit was still there, as if held up on poles, his eyes fixed in the distance.

Silattuq was trying to understand. He had never seen that sort of funeral. Above all, he had never seen that strength of pain, that skill at trimming axe-heads and cutting trees.

Arvik also stared at the distance as he watched his own heart stumble. Who was this mountain who did the deeds of a man?

Nuliaq and the two children, silent, were trying to bring Shashauan back by looking at her. But the light returned empty-handed. A kind of respect prevented the Inuit from really returning to the spot where they had fixed their eyes.

After her work, Shashauan took root in the mountain of pain she had finally exhausted. She could see again, but it had begun to snow flakes as big as blackbirds. She lay down in the furs that had belonged to her father, which lay beside the platform. The sweat was freezing on her skin. The cold was killing the seed in her belly.

\* \* \*

All was empty now. The bird clan was lost in the snow, awaiting the kind attentions of the cold to finish this crazy race.

She thought of the Inuit. He had run off, saying to himself: "No more Innu, ever. He is crazy. He acts alone. For the sake of a personal victory, he made the herd flee."

Shashauan was alone in a solitude measured by the vastness of the ocean of rocks and ice that surrounded her and by a particular absence, greater than all the Nitassinans of the earth, the enveloping of all the envelopings. Snow covered the bearskins she pressed around her shoulders.

She was waiting now for the wolf, its teeth, its belly, its spirit. She wanted it more than the cold.

"Devour me. I will be a she-wolf. I will hunt the caribou running, I will drive it back to the pack. Never alone again. I won't betray my own."

She slept a long time in this prayer.

Then she stood up.

The moon made a great sparkling snowball that it rolled in the fog. The night threw ashes on the moon. The horizon had pulled away from the earth. The rocky plateaus were now just mirrors of the sky, wan and vertical. Unless it was the whole plate of the sky that had pivoted, head first. You couldn't know any more. You didn't want to know any more.

\* \* \*

A smell of meat and fat opened Shashauan's nostrils. The smell crossed the cavities of a nose she didn't recognize; a cavern that sniffed, one might have said. She felt new muscles and energetic paws. She had lost her heaviness at the shoulders. She no longer had breasts, but nipples on the belly. She stamped her feet, shaking her fur.

She thought it had happened. A wolf had devoured her.

She turned her ears to the right and to the left and heard lemmings scratching under the snow. Then she began to sing to the moon:

"Grandfather Uhu, I know you are there. My flight as a swallow ended tonight. The bird clan is no more. Long live the wolf clan! I have been devoured by a wolf. And my hope exists no

longer. I am free of my dream, now nothing separates me from you any longer. Come, so that I may bite you.

-- Girl, my big granddaughter, here you are, arrived at last.

-- Keep your distance, she-wolves like owls...

-- It won't be as easy as that. Do you remember the dried moss in your leather pants... On the most beautiful days of the fall, on the ticipitakan, just over a swallow's nest, with a grandfather who was cooking meat not very far from you and a father who was hunting for you... It was a semblance. Now, in the immense solitude of these rocky plateaus furrowed with rivers and broken up by lakes, there is this whole big bowl of people, and you in the middle like a left-behind kudlik. No atshen will eat you. The stomach you are moving around in, no one knows it, and it doesn't digest us. It spits us out in front of ourselves."

Shashauan looked all around her.

A sea of milk as far as the eye could see. A great white fur. In the fog and the wind, the snow extended vertically as much as horizontally. All the colors struggled there in the form of pallid shadows, minute nuances. The sun had slipped behind the earth, and the scintillating ball of the moon accentuated the white fur's tints. Everywhere it was the same overcoat of snow, the same hay-harvest of imprecise and undecided colors, which bordered on blue or pink, green or yellow, without ever being able to assert themselves.

"What is breathing at the same time as I am?" Shashauan asked herself. "This thing with the moist, thick, resinous breath I have always been swallowed up in, this thing that warms me and cools me, tears me down and builds me back up, what is it? I feel it. I can't do anything against it. It looks at itself like a whale calf. Through my eyes, it sees itself. It has plunged all its forms into the abysses. And now it looks at me and it complains. All it sees is a formless sea. It can become a bit of grass, a bit of a foot, a bit of no matter what starting from the same soft and white thing. So, it doesn't know."

"Who am I?" it says again. "Am I a tree, perhaps? And it erases the tree. Am I a mountain, perhaps? And it erases the mountain. Am I Uhu, perhaps? And it erases the owl. Am I Tshiashk, perhaps? And it erases the seagull. Am I Shashauan, perhaps? But Shashauan doesn't know. So it has set Shashauan down in its breath, alone."

And the owl spoke:

"Wait, I beg of you, wait just a little more, for the envelope of solitude is all the sky and all the earth."

Shashauan waited.

The snow raised its white tides over her body.

The waiting had lost its before and its after, its defeat and its torments. Shashauan was there without inside or outside. Simply full of her silence like an immense deaf stone. And all held

in her, all was held in her, and all depended on her. Shashauan savored this solidity. Calm as Tshiashk's waxy face, she savored it as she chewed some morsels of goose.

## Nine

Shashauan heard dogs in the distance, very far off, like an evening wind that would swallow everything in a single gulp of air.

Tshiashk filled the wind's breath. With his fetid odor, he was covering his daughter, he was burying her.

Her father's fingers twisted the leather collar on Shashauan's neck as if to strangle her. The Innu girl was suffocating. For one moment she managed to hiss the scream passing through her insides. The moment that followed, the scream exploded in her chest; it could barely be heard.

"Arvik!"

The feeble sound had burst out of her heart and shone in the snow's blaring silence. And the snow clapped its hands to extinguish it.

In the distance, the young Inuit hunter listened with all his body stretched out on the arch of the sky. He was like an otter skin stretched to the breaking point by the sinews that attached it to the drum hoop. He felt the air tremble on his leather membrane and behind the membrane he smelled the grass of spring and the moss and the lichen hurling their colors in every direction. While he was smelling spring, a mountain was pushing his back to make him dive through the air's taut leather.

Arvik looked at the gray spot in the distance waving like the tail of a wolverine. Perhaps she wasn't as frightening as all that, this woman-mountain! From a distance, she resembled instead a crack in the opacity of the world. But there was no mistaking it: only a mountain could face up to the infinite like this. And, whatever the spring and summer might be, the heat and all one could want, Arvik knew that the grass never gets the better of a mountain. High up, there is always an untouchable outcropping, a zone perpetually virgin, white and impenetrable. There, one eternally loses oneself. And that is what a man wants: to lose himself.

"May I never find myself! Ever!"

Arvik's spirit had prayed without his knowing it.

He had never so clearly formulated this prayer which had been ripening since his birth, and perhaps since the birth of the first male on earth. He found all his hope in it. Hope was still vague in his mind, like a choppy patch on the sea, like the taste of being alive and carried off by the sea. The only way to live was not to find oneself.

He entered into a strange vision. The spirit of Shashauan was coming directly from the white circle that was closing around her, there, now, and covering her in a pale fog. What he saw in space reflected what was happening in time. Shashauan was the daughter of the snow. She was in the snow's image. Cold and white, she radiated every color. Heated on the kudlik, she became liquid and transparent. Burned by a blazing fire, she evaporated, filling the world. She was body in the cold and spirit in the heat, and this frightened Arvik. For flies devour the body and the wind disperses the spirit. This is why she rose up like a mountain, that she breathed like a mountain. Wave swept away. She would keep a circle of whiteness that grass could never make green. A circle, but not all. The rest she would keep as fertile as the warm earth at the bottom of a canyon. And this is why he, Arvik, felt the same feeling he had felt long ago for a giant whale that had astounded him. The six hunters had remained paralyzed, harpoons at the ends of their arms, hearts petrified. Never before had they seen a living mountain tear itself out of the sea, leap over the water and dive with such pleasure as it splashed the tiny Inuits with deluges. And he, Arvik, had stopped himself from plunging into its play. Suddenly, the hunters had understood that, if death were not frightening, no man could survive the desire to be devoured by a whale. We eat the flesh of animals to fight the crazy and secret desire to disappear in the mouth of the world, between the earth's definitive lips. Fear is just a temporary curtain to keep us far from whales and mountains.

Arvik restrained himself from diving toward the cry he thought he had heard. He held on with both hands, but time was fraying the rope. Finally the dogs decided: they ran at full speed toward the cry they had heard even though it had only been a whistling.

The komatik and the family were bumping into blocks of ice. But lower down, the snow was thick. Only the dogs' noses could capture Tshiashk's fetid odor. The dogs ran toward that putrefaction from which the cracks of spring seemed suddenly to be coming.

\* \* \*

Arvik was no longer very far from Shashauan: a stone's throw. He had gone into the odor. The dogs had stopped and remained behind with the family. Arvik had run ahead. He couldn't help it: he was sucked in by the mountain. It wasn't an ordinary mountain. It was an upside-down abyss, the bottom toward the sky, an enormous abyss that curved like a whale out of water, hungry and cajoling.

And Arvik's tongue was already melting in Shashauan's mouth, running like a torrent into an immense and pure void from which it could never return, perhaps. Who would want to be just a little heap of flesh, simply a bait, a brief meal? All the hunters in the world hope to fill the horrifying maw of the night to the brim, fill it to the point of making it vomit. No, I swear it, there is no woman big enough and powerful enough for a hunter. The more she terrifies him, the more he wants her. Arvik longed for Shashauan.

\* \* \*

Tshiashk had nearly disappeared from his platform, carried off by invisible eagles and vulgar crows. The winter had eaten its final meal. Sated, for its prey had been formidable, it will deliver the earth to spring.

Mad with impatience, the heat burst the snow, threw the ice in its boiling oils, set free its black waters, rolled its dough of lichen to cover the great plateaus of snow, cleared the tufts of trees crawling in the canyons, woke up the bears and all the animals in their burrows. It swept along great flocks of geese, made flocks of terns take to the air, swallowed immense quantities of snow and vomited torrents of rain.

And then it lit its kudlik on an immense lake in the east, called Uinipek because it is an interior sea.

Yes, Silattuq and all his family, and Shashauan, and Tshiashk upside-down in the skin of birds, saw in the dead of night a green aurora slide like a serpent in the thick curtains of the night. The extraordinary thing was the time and the place: in the spring and in the east.

Why was the aurora calling the moon like a solitary wolf?

The simplest answer was that the meat of the caribou and of the geese was no longer anything more than some excrement the lichen gorged itself on. Nothing any longer. Only a small package of dried meat remained, and the long bones. Nothing else. The northern route, the one that led to the Inuit village, was too long and not productive enough. An excessive risk.

Silattuq remembered: once, his father had gone off toward the east. He had followed a big river and had found himself near an enormous salt-water lake, the Uinipek, which kept in relative warmth the fish that didn't like the open ocean very much. The family had caught plenty of fish and then returned to hunt the caribou on the rocky plateaus before getting back to its village the following winter with two sleds full of meat, fat, and furs.

Tshiashk had killed a mother caribou and its little one, but he had made the whole herd flee and turn off the path. They were seen running in the distance. It was as if a great joy had galloped away from them, a joy they hadn't even been able to feel, one that had no control over disappointment. It was life that was leaving, a whole mass of forces. This had run at top speed far away. But perhaps they were being held in reserve for the following autumn, at the time when the caribou returned from their migration.

So it was natural for the aurora borealis to be over the Uinipek, in a Nitassinan called Sheshatshiu, in which an Innu people lived by fishing as much as by hunting. Shashauan could serve as an interpreter; Arvik was slipping sweet words in her ears, and she was understanding them better and better.

\* \* \*

Shashauan could no longer forget that other morning in the shadows of the igloo, when, amid the noise of the geese, the light of dawn had just cracked like a block of wood explodes, spreading its perfume. Arvik enveloped it. He had made an island in the sea.

Suddenly, all the infinity of fog had turned around an island green and thick with trees. The whales, instead of wandering, played around the island. The fishes grouped themselves in schools. On reefs scattered around the island, the seals basked in the sun. The monsters of the sea dived into the abysses, bringing clouds of crustaceans back up with them. Life was dancing all around. All was brought back toward the center.

## Ten

The sled had been transformed into a raft. The dogs struggled in runoff than almost lifted them off the ground. We were all like frogs, feet struggling against the marsh, nose lifted high in order to breathe.

Beneath our feet, the water filtered into cracks in the rock; there it ran like blood in the veins, loading itself with particles of earth and stone, then it entered the bowels of ice and rock, plunging into the depths. In the plateau's ossified caverns, it rolled and roared. It buried the frightening echo of the atshens who boiled rats' brains. It licked the muddy walls to feed itself, then, tired, filtered into layers of silt to sleep. But there, roots came to suck it. The water rose in hollow hairs, swelled these fleshy arteries which, crushing it from below, made it rise in spasms. It entered tree trunks distended with pleasure; convulsions led it higher into waxy buds and there it exploded in the menstrual light of the setting sun. Descending and reascending, water participated in all the plants' fertility.

It was the earth of spring, an immense belly covered with melting snow, a carpet of liquefying ice, water running merrily, rivulets that came and went, a sun that sucked the trees, the rising of the sap, the showering of the buds. A sky that gorged itself. A pollination falling back in colors. The grass flourished, the lichen lit up, and all this coat gave itself to grazers.

The rocky plateau had become a multicolored plumage impassable by dogsled. Shashauan's eyes scrutinized the wet places and the rifts. The sun had set in a mauve flame. The color was silent, but the sky still shone.

They had to find a way out. All this beauty smelled like famine.

There in a ravine, in the middle of a growth of cedar, a grove of spruce; in the middle of the spruce, five birches sprayed up happiness. A honeyed, waxy sap slipped along the smooth bark. The birches shone in the night, so thick that it twisted the hub of the moon.

Shashauan stood up on the sled. The dogs had just turned off to sit down where it was dry. They were exhausted. Silattuq understood that the Innu girl was seeing something that an Inuit couldn't see. She seemed to break through a wall, slip her arm in it and return with her hand full of fish. What had she seen?

Below a ravine, the birches, like lightning-bolts frozen in their own light, cracked a big red moon reflected on the cliff behind them. The moon had done its work: it had plunged into

the abyss and disappeared behind the horizon. But the birches were still burning with light: one might have said they had eaten pieces of moon and that now they were sweating them out like a kudlik.

The family built a hut of stones between these shining trees and clothed it with skins.

Shashauan sat down on the hut with one of the dogs, which was dying of exhaustion. The dog wheezed in its fur. The family's snoring warmed the skins beneath her.

The dog's death reassured her.

\* \* \*

The morning's first rays were starting to clean the form of the birches. The Innu girl studied the detail, the length and the width of the trunks, the height of the first branches, the suppleness the new sap had brought. She drew toward her the whispering of the wind. She listened to the trees' conversation. The smell of cedar and of spruce was entangled in the murmurs of the birches. But it surely was the smell of the Innu Nitassinan. An Innu island in the solitude of the sea of rock, as if pieces of the skin and fat of her country had been scattered by a giant in these desolate lands. At the bottom of the canyons, shoots of her world.

An incredible strength was there, charged with the echoes of children, with the sweat of hunters, with recognizable breaths. And this made her solitude melt. It wasn't five birches she in front of her, but a big piece of Innu flesh set down in the cellar of the Inuits' treeless plateau. And this flesh extended toward the great river, and the great river reached toward the Uinipek, and the great saline lake reeled out its waters into the sea, and there, on the sea's edge, strange Innu lived in fragments of taiga. "Uhu told me..." Shashauan remembered.

And then, she began to think that life was transmitted by sex. The birches still pointed their members toward the sky, but they had given everything. And the moon had gone off loaded with seed. It would return bigger and bigger to roam around its lovers, whom it multiplied. And just about everywhere it would give birth. In the sea, it would be whales and seals of every species; in the sky, a flock of white geese, of Canada geese or of terns; in the earth, a mountain covered with snow. But also so many other creatures in the image of her lovers. No matter the manner, the bellies formed the thousands ways of life, as if they had to open all the possibilities and put them on display in the flux of preys so that they would be renewed and reinvented. And these thousand arrangements of life would fall back in great sprays of seed on the belly of the earth to participate in its continuous flowering.

At this moment, life, resurrected in smells, filled Shashauan's nostrils, opened eyes for her, enlightened her intelligence and swelled her muscles. An owl, not very far away, turned its head toward her.

"Uhu," she whispered to me, "go away a little while. Leave me alone for a moment."

I regained my energy and went a little further off.

\* \* \*

Shashauan felt the enormous permission that had just relieved her shoulders. A light like ptarmigan feathers rained down on her. In the warmth of the air, the permission dug a tunnel. She felt that, were she to take this tunnel, the weight and the fatigue, the hunger and the lassitude would stay behind on the hut, and she would walk free.

Shashauan could feel the tube of peace: near its walls, her body was heavy like that of a starving person, but in the middle, she fluttered about better than a swallow. A conduit of lightness that led where? She didn't know. But it was her road.

She drew my approval toward herself: the silence of the owl who had flown away. She went down into this tunnel, bringing this silence with her. She found herself beside five birches. Her axe resembled a raven, sharp of wing, nimble of beak.

Shashauan reassured the birches with a song she herself composed:

*We are going to run on the water.*

*I will deliver you and you will deliver me.*

*I will carry you on my shoulders*

*and you will carry me between your sides.*

*We will go into the land of the fishes*

*to eat a big piece of red flesh...*

And the biggest of the birches bowed.

To spare it suffering, Shashauan went around its wiry skin with her sharp-edged ulu. She used a wooden mallet to drive the knife in deeper. She felt the tree buck, then yield to an intoxicating anesthesia. Then she planted her axe in the bone of the wood. She didn't leave it time to catch its breath. It gave way in great splinters. It lay down on its strongest branches. She broke its arms. It gave her its soul.

She made a long groove to free it of its armor. Its member was exposed, and it wept. She heard its lament:

"Where are you going with my strength and my seed? Where are you going with my body? Who will be the people you will fatten with your milk? Who will respect me?"

-- I will respect you like my child, you will be my knees on the water and my house on the land."

And he gave her his trust.

He who had, from the end of his roots, for so long sought a dependable source of water and food, he who had dug for so many years, he who had threaded his way between stones, he who had known so many disappointments and failures, he had found his place at last in the bottom of the canyon. But this wasn't all: he had had to climb all the way to the sun, and

faster than the spruce that threatened him, stretch out his leaves as high as possible, drink one by one the bowls of clear soup the North's light offered him, be content with so little, and in exchange for this participate in eternity, drop by drop, grow each year scarcely more than the length of the end of a fingernail. In winter, hold out endlessly against the ice. And behold, now he was raised up into an immense silence, as wide as a white goose's flight, empty, or rather full of impossibilities of being shot down... And all this so that a young Innu woman, outside her land and completely lost, would ask him for his life, with scarcely a moment to reflect and decide...

In exchange for this gift, Shashauan gave him her trust as well. She would confer on him an enormous responsibility: he would carry a family filled with hope on a raging river in spring. The route would be perilous, it would be like a thread in the middle of the mouth of a whale. From now on, he would have to put all his strength into lightness, abandon, and attention...

\* \* \*

The thaw. The earth opened, the sun's enormous arms came through breaks in the clouds to raise the mists, the mists danced with the new winds... The moon refused to leave the sun so that he, the birch who had stopped connecting earth and sky, he who had fallen and Shashauan had flayed, so that he, the white tree, would not give his life, but fashion it in another way and connect a human family to its destiny by the water road.

His bark became a sacred skin; his wood, sacred bones; his sap, a sacred blood. Shashauan was going to carry a child of the sky and of the earth, a child older than me, her grandfather, but purer than a day-old baby. She would carry it like a big hat, she would carry it like a little bird as far as possible. They would go toward a green land, a Nitassinan bursting with black spruce and aspen.

"I swear I will never abandon you."

They had both said the same sentence, by the same words, by the same mouth of silence.

\* \* \*

Shashauan rolled a huge parchment of bark. She went back over it again. She began again. Fatigue and hunger no longer had power over her.

Silattuq and Arvik, who had been watching her for a while, went to wash themselves in the river. The water was cold, but the air was mild. They rubbed themselves with moss torn from the rock and got dressed again, putting spruce needles in their clothes. They said in their language:

"Now we smell like the Innu. We can help you."

She cut, they carried. She ordered, they obeyed. The work made good progress.

\* \* \*

At the end of the second day, two great leaves of bark were spread out on the stakes that held them in the shape of a bean pod. Other pieces of bark were there beside them, ready to be sewn. Further away, branches had been squared, moistened and bent into thwarts; they were still attached to stakes. All that was needed for two canoes.

Nuliaq and her two children had unearthed some long spruce roots, split them into strips, and let them soak in a brook. Silattuq and Arvik had cut cedar branches free of knots, removed their bark and stuck them in the mud.

The third day, Shashauan and Nuliaq sewed the birchbark. That same evening, Shashauan split the cedar into slender ribs. Silattuq and Arvik were dumbfounded at the Innu girl's nimbleness. They had never seen green wood yield itself like that, and to a hand that nimble.

When the pieces of bark were sewn, Shashauan inserted the thwarts one by one. She cut them to the height of the gunwales and inserted them in the rails. Next, she slipped the cedar ribs between the thwarts and the bark. The ribs overlapped and each one was bevelled so that it would remain flat. She inserted the small boards that served as seats, cutting a place in the rails for each one. Next, the edges of the bark were folded over toward the inside and hemmed with strips of root.

The fourth day, in a hollow stone heated by a wood fire, Shashauan mixed the coating, made of fir resin blended with the last remnants of caribou fat. She cut the end of one of her fingers in order to pour a drop of her blood into it. Then she waterproofed all the seams.

That evening, they sang until late at night to give life to the canoes.

Then everyone went to sleep in the stone hut, letting the canoes regain their spirits beginning with the strange components of their new bodies.

The sixth day, Shashauan carved a swallow on the snub nose of her canoe. And the canoe shivered under her hand. On the other, she carved a white bear.

The little pack was ready to set out on the river, with poles in front to avoid the shoals and a paddle behind to provide the direction. It was useless to row: the river resembled a gathering of hungry dogs in a hurry to get back to their village.

\* \* \*

The size of the birches had left Shashauan with no choice: two small canoes rather than one big one. But how to get Arvik and Silattuq to enter this movement which has to do with water and ducks? She did what I had showed her.

"Who are you?" she asked them with the few Inuit words she knew.

Silattuq danced and mimed: "I am the shadow of the moon: when it goes toward the west, I go toward the east."

Shashauan understood that he knew how to direct the canoe from the back.

Arvik gave Shashauan the little statue he has finished: his vision of Sedna, and he began his mime: "I come from the depths of the sea. My muscles have the instinct of the water. I can breathe the pockets of air I enclose under my armpits. I coat my body with seal fat, and the cold doesn't reach me. I am the swimming bear..."

Shashauan understood that he would be able to avoid the shoals with the pole.

The two men lay down and went to sleep in their canoe. The dream would do the rest.

\* \* \*

The next day, they set out on the waters. Shashauan in front with her long pole, Nuliaq behind with the paddle, the children between them. In the rear canoe, Arvik had taken the front, his father the back, and between the two, the puppies; the adult dogs were going to follow on the shores. The baggage was shared, and they had had to dismantle the sled and cover the walrus tusks and the carved driftwood so that they wouldn't break the boat's bark.

## Eleven

It isn't always possible to survive the exasperation of a river whose work does not provide. There is too much water that has to flow downstream. It multiplies its arms, doubles its muscles, its hands proliferate by the thousand, its fingers multiply... It pours out its gourds, discharges its baskets, it goes from scoops into basins, from bowlfuls into cisterns, it trips, tumbles, and goes head over heels infernally off its course. It digs ever more enormous recipients and, when it can do more, it throws everything into the same torrent, which eats the earth, breaks the bushes, sweeps away piles of loose rocks and stones. For all its being rapid, it does not provide: it overflows, loses its head, and attacks the mosquitoes that scratch its skin. Lost on a fury like this, we can survive only if the river forgets us.

If we want to merge with the uprooted trees going downstream half drowned, we can't allow ourselves the smallest hesitation. One eye looks in the distance without ever losing track of the current, while the other studies the network of eddies and rocks in the foreground. Only small movements, just enough to avoid the shoal without ever putting the canoe sideways. The pole saves the bow. The paddle reacts to place the stern in the groove of the water.

We slide, we let go, we let ourselves be taken, lifted, lowered, without ever ceasing to struggle against the outcroppings of rock. Everything is decided by the water, save for the tiny transversal inflections. And yet it's not about deciding, for there's not enough time: it's about letting sensations work. If fear gets mixed up in it, one hesitation can create catastrophe. Pleasure alone can enter such an avalanche as if it were its element. But how, in such great danger, can pleasure be left free?

By laughing at death, as Shashauan's mother and grandmother had. By laughing at death, because death doesn't like us laughing at it.

But watch out! When silence stands up like a gap in the screaming tumult of the waves, we must proceed to a study of the water. The paddler is a little freer; he looks further ahead, carefully examines the hair of the water, the discrepancy of the perspective, and if he yells "A falls ahead!", we attempt the hazardous maneuver of going ashore.

We ought to have waited until the river lost a little of its primary rage, but there were no longer any reserves of food. There was nothing to hunt in the high plateaus, and the fish in the river were hiding under rocks, waiting until the water calmed down. A few days more, and the strength of the little troop would have run out. Starting now, they had to use the family's last energy; it wasn't possible to do otherwise. Man himself is a river of energy that has its own laws. This river had to take advantage of the tumbling of the waters so that they would arrive in the Unipek as quickly as possible.

Whether we think about it or not, life slips between different forms of death. Between dying of hunger or dying drowned, we must force our way, we must fight.

Fortunately, in the first section of the descent the water didn't yet have all of its force. It hesitated in the mud it tore from its shores and the roots that held it back with grabbing arms. Arvik and Silattuq entered the art of canoeing with all the memory of the kayak and the waves of a rising sea. Already, the joy of the water was carrying them away. They had fun in the current, waddled on the river without leaving its thread. The light made their faces shimmer and the wind spoke in their hair.

Nuliaq learned with the speed of her instinct riveted on the lives of her two children. Shashauan had recommended that she hold the paddle rather loosely. All that needed to be done was to simply follow the water. It was she, in the bow, who would make sure to avoid any abruptness. She went at it with small spidery movements, perceiving the best paths as if the fish were whispering in her ear the names of the most dangerous rocks.

It was a joyful slide, an extremely necessary pleasure. The other river, the all-encompassing river, the supreme river that carries off everything, breaths, heartbeats, pangs of anguish, is never anything other than a tumbling down, a collapse, a falls. And she, the falls, the muzzle in the air, she who spits on all the swarming of the earth, she must surely know what she is doing. If not, who does know?

\* \* \*

Ahead of them, too far for its thundering to reach them, a wide-open gorge engulfed the river, forming an enormous twist of water. The water in the knots of this twist was so piled up on itself, so dense, that the light was reflected off it as if from mica. Silver hairs rebounding on a vertical mass.

Below, the water crashed, only to make its spirits rise again in tatters. Downstream, a great black basin reflected the sky. A monster of rock, turned due south, was bathed in a verdure of mosses, of cedars and of shrubs. It must have had huge invisible arms, for it tore the

mists and clouds in front of it so that the sun pierced it. This gave it strength. And it burst out laughing in the exhaustion of the waters.

Several large migrating birds were paddling in the basin. They were whistling swans, scouts probably, who knew the region perfectly and had sensed the early spring. They fished amid abundance, for no fish thought of climbing up the falls or dared descend in the furies of the torrent. They were captives. And the whistling swans gorged themselves.

Just then, the moment arrived when the swans were sated and peacefully stood still on the recumbent mirror. It was then that a shivering made a sleeping owl leave his hiding place. He flapped his wings in the thunders of the falls and then returned to his branch.

One of the whistling swans, the biggest and boldest, took off and turned around the column of air rising in front of the falls. He went out through the hair of mist of the giant. And there he saw two shells of birchbark going down the torrent. On the bark, humans totally concentrated on avoiding the nearest shoals, one with a pole, the other with a paddle. Two women had placed their little ones in the middle of the boat. In the men's fragile craft, puppies were sticking their muzzles out through a jumble of furs. These poor starving people were crawling in the hollows of the water's furrows. Enclosed by its white explosions, they saw nothing. They were certainly going to plunge into the abyss.

It was heartrending.

Above the river, the enormous pale mass of sky scraped the rocky plateaus, crosswise to the canyons, advancing all in one piece like a glacier. Its pinkish and bluish grooves did not descend to such unimportant little cracks in the earth. One might have said it was a marble slab transported by centipedes. At the altitude of these titans, the rivers and the tiny twigs descending them existed only to aerate their thousand feet all the length of their solar portage.

They were occupied with noon, and the yellow ball they rolled between their shoulders seemed heavier than ever. They had nothing to do with the two birch boats, with this family and its bawling puppies.

The rocks of the cliff stretched out their heads of stone on each side of the falls; in spite of this, they could see nothing of this tragedy, which was nothing at the colossal scale of these skulls of granite. They didn't even notice the seasons. The centuries scarcely wore them down, and the river always sank a little more in the narrows of their straps. They scratched the sky's fleece with their fangs in the air. To know if the scales of a birch would have pussies this year, this was not their business.

The whistling swan felt the thickness of the air stiffen in the light of noon, and its tired steps, and its heavy weight, and its tremendous torpor in the too-vast infinity of its course. The bird cleaved the air. It whistled with all its might in the thunder mounting from below, a shrill whistling to pierce the water's thunder.

\* \* \*

At that moment, Arvik raised his eyes and saw in front of him the whistling swan that had left the river.

He said to himself that a bird like that couldn't be there, in the water's eddies, then simply take off, rise up with the sole intention of seeing a big piece of the world. It was not a place either for fishing or for resting. No, it came from someplace lower, from a black basin in a dizzying depth.

A speculation faster than the rapids. Arvik felt the danger in all his limbs and cried:

"A falls ahead!"

Shashauan turned around, and read in his frantic eyes a love greater than the earth. For at this moment Arvik had decided that, if Shashauan plunged, he would go to join her. She noticed this decision in the Inuit's smile, which was for her and for no one else. The young Inuit leaped toward his destiny, as if to make children for her that he would have thrown on the river's fertile banks, there, on this day, in the fields of lupines and yellow poppies. Arvik bit into the flesh of the air. And in his eyes there was a whistling that, like the swan's, pierced the thunder of the waters.

\* \* \*

The two canoes managed to reach the shore just in time, held between the heads of a black rock that looked out at the void.

In front of them, an enormous abyss panted, and its white tongue struck a huge bowl of black water, where it rebounded as new green growth.

Men, women, children, and puppies were so packed against each other that every boundary between them had exploded. Silattuq and Nuliaq had taken Shashauan as their daughter, and their son, who had finally triumphed over the cold and its trials, had taken root in her. Shashauan felt her solitude burst in the thunders of the falls. Numbers do nothing to counter solitude, but fidelity tightens the Innu's hold on his ancestral trunk. And the falls, its mass, and its possible lethal futures had gathered a very dense heap of fidelity in the heart of this strange family.

It was all of a people that was there, death at its feet, life before it. Shashauan observed the bird circling in the rising spray. The whistling swan had transformed what could have been only flesh ripped to shreds into a people standing proud. A people not yet seen, but curling up in Shashauan's tense belly.

The swan turned above their heads for quite a while, then went off in the distance with its traveling companions.

\* \* \*

An incredible lust for life had touched the hearts of the human family. In the hollow of her fists, Shashauan felt the vein of life passing. She was one of its necessary passages, as if the river needed to cross over her soul as much as the rocks.

All this, this great creature, was her necessity. There was no place anywhere else. She had to come to terms with these elements. Yet, starting from this day, it was the air, the earth and the water that had to come to terms with Shashauan. The river of life had to pass through her and nowhere else, for otherwise life no longer had meaning, it was only a drunk and unbearable fury. It was in her that all this was going to be transformed into Innu. Upstream, there were mountains, vast starry expanses, trees, clouds, torrents, brooks, the muted sound of a falls; after her, it would be an Innu clan, eyes in the sails of the sky. Her belly, from throat to vagina, was the passage from the vast to the singular, from dispersion to memory, from vitality to the new Innu.

In her belly, Shashauan felt all her ancestors wanting to meet their descendents. She felt also all the Inuit ancestors wanting the Innu. Link in the chain, she wanted the river to cross over her, for the strength of the upstream mountains to flow toward a village she sensed downstream. This had to pass through her, through her sex, her heart and her chest. She was the necessary constriction in the narrow minute of a great spurting-out. As if all the Innu river and all the Inuit sea had to pass through the needle's eye of a single woman.

"In order to better feel itself," she thought.

She wanted to keep this moment in her memory, for one day there would be a little mountain who would ask: "Why the stone, why the sun?" And an Innu with flat cheeks would tell her the story of the whistling swan.

To become the story that holds the future has a price, and this price is a great happiness.

## Twelve

The thunder of the falls frightened the clouds of mist racing onto the cliffs and streaming to the bottom. The rocks shone. Facing directly south in an escarpment, an enormous block of flat stone was drying its back in the sun. Over this limestone shoulder blade, a patch of blue sky barred with yellow rays kept watch over the scene. It was on this gleaming patch that Silattuq and Arvik had set up the qarmat, burying a good thick layer of spruce boughs inside it.

The basin foamed beneath the falls. The lake gleamed in front of it like a black pupil. Further off, the hut heated its furs and salivated. Jade reflections swam in the black eye: greenish braids driven in by the radiant poles of the sun.

The children watched the forms disappear.

Suddenly Arvik burst out laughing. He stretched out his clothes in the sun and slipped into the water with his trident. His feet formed a single fin. He undulated, insinuating himself between the fibers of the water. Shashauan had never seen such a swimmer. The salmon themselves were dumbfounded. The hunter entered the water's ligaments, distended its swelling muscles, smoothed its tendons, wormed his way in, as if into a white sheath: the

lake noticed nothing. But, from time to time, the fisherman threw a big fish on the shore. Shashauan and the children stunned it, cleaned it and spread it out on warm rocks.

\* \* \*

The sun paced up and down in the sky, bowed, came back up, didn't want to set. Tired, it gave a start and perked up, sending its rays to the top of the cliffs. Then it packed up its light again. The sky cracked and sweated blood.

Soon the cold began to hug the walls. The runoff froze, the mist sank into the shadows, and the pond grabbed the stone with its claws of ice.

When he came out of the water, Arvik was blue, but he was laughing: split and cleaned, three sets of big salmon slept side by side on one stone.

Silattuq was not laughing. He had just transformed the qarmat into a sweat lodge. The fish were grilling on the fire and the stones were heating. With a big roast fish, Arvik was swallowed into the sweat lodge. This wasn't enough. They slipped Shashauan behind him. Arvik was still laughing.

The Innu girl let him eat one piece, then gave him another. The stones spat steam and drooled a white mucus. Arvik was dripping with sweat.

The thunder of the falls didn't dare enter the qarmat, and the noise of Arvik's mouth crumpled Shashauan's warm silence.

When the heat subsided, Shashauan pulled Arvik under her fur and covered him with her silky body. The family settled down around them for the night. The rumbling of bellies put brains to sleep. The sky shook its black mane, the stars stirred a bit, and all the remnants of the light were fixed on the eternal spines of the starry peace.

\* \* \*

That night, the stones and the trees were so immutable in the bite of the cold that Shashauan began to swim with her man in the waters of dream. The sky exhaled a thick breath. Shashauan has inhaled deeply and plunged.

The fish resembled lanterns of yellow bark. The water had the texture of beaver oil and the color of honey. The smell of fir woke up the people of the village. There was Shiship and Uapineu, girls and men, children and dogs. Pishou, Tshiashk's best hunting companion, the bears' friend, well! he was fishing for salmon. The village dipped bits of fish into boiling caribou fat, rolled the pieces in lichen ashes, and all the sweetness of the world slipped into the widened throats. They sang in the drum of the forest. A muted sound. Moose eyes lit up the fir forest. Innu land, mild land, delectable land...

\* \* \*

Arvik and Shashauan snored in a nest of fever. Day had set up its tent around the world.

Silattuq and Nuliaq had gone back up on the plateau. A smell of dung had awoken them before dawn. Musk-oxen were grazing a sheet of grass.

Irniq, their boy, and Panik, their daughter, had made a kayak the size of a hand which they steered with the end of a stick. A small blue stone swayed on the craft. On the little stone, a lump of fat poured its smells into the water. The children imagined whales approaching the bait. The stratagem consisted of bringing the kayak toward the shore in order to stick Arvik's trident in the animal. Panik manipulated the pole, Irviq held the harpoon. A salmon lurked in the shadows...

The sun had set up shop on a stone above the falls and was looking down. Fever was swelling the hut of the lovers. The laughs of the playing children kept fear at a distance. Up above, the falls were crammed with moss and flowers coming out of its armpits; a clump of cedar grew between its thighs at the very bottom, and fiddleheads came out between its toes. Panik gathered an armful of them, cooked them, and shared them with her brother.

In the qarmat, dreams knocked against each other like the bones on a collar. Teeth chattered. Shashauan had embraced her hero's fever, and the two in their delirium were open to each other in their inmost depths.

It was a truly bright and serene day. The air was like a garland of lupine. An owl turned its head in order to screw this landscape into its heart. When we are as old as a big black spruce and well placed between two good rocks and feel the last fibrils of our roots drink their mustaches full in the deep earth, when we are reassured like this and see the house of the stars unfasten its wedding gown and the reflections of the moon slip over its black skin, oh well! we smoke some herbs and our lungs go off in the air like a cloud of crows.

All the bottom of the world is lit up by the top, and it is beautiful.

\* \* \*

In the thickness of furs, under the warm hut, fever had made the pods of the man and the woman explode. Now they were the arms of the same germinating bean, entwined in their own pleasure. Neither of the two heads knew anything of what was happening outside.

But what was happening in the stone hut? What was really happening?

The image. Yes! Perhaps the image of the river falling into the great black hole of the lake. Or else the image of the sun seated on its bench of stone letting bubbles of light fall into the water and collapse. It is always a movement of descent that an ascent takes up again. One side must always envelop what the other develops, and pleasure in living be returned to the middle of memory. In the middle, just in the middle, memory works like a womb, it wants to yield nothing to time. With a knife, life engraves its grating movement, and memory wraps the Innu feeling up.

We say to ourselves: life continues. But there's always the rupture.

In the qarmat, arms and legs made children. This was done of itself. No one, especially not them, would have been able to separate the limbs convulsing in each other. And this couldn't stop, any more than the falls could be silent, any more than the sun could stifle its rays or the stars could flee in panic.

The world is enchanted, happy in its unique body, opening and multiplying infinitely, as if gushing out from an eternal return to itself.

\* \* \*

The owl turned its head from one side and then from the other. It screwed the drum of its life into the rocks of its heart. It inlaid the feathers of birds in the bones of these future ancestors. The fruit of two peoples is good; it is a fruit, but above all it is a seed.

No one below understood that it was about a secret purpose.

Everyone pursues who knows what, but no one sees the arms that swallow up chests and remake the world. The secret, I can surely say, will never be heard, it will always be looked for somewhere else, it is shouted out by everything that moves, nothing, absolutely nothing, silences it, it is there, shouting at the top of its voice, it tells of itself. It is secret only because our heads are somewhere else.

Let's return to the story. The man who is afraid instinctively closes his eyes. The woodchuck that hears the eagle's cry throws itself into its hole. The mole will pass its life in a network of refuges. This world of fear grows bitter in its burrow. Then, sometimes, rarely, but regularly, a man, a woman flees their refuge and goes back alone toward the north to stretch their gaze. These hunters of space travel on the fringe of the glaciers, living off lichen, caribou, seals and whales. It is then that the mountains bump against each other and the secret of the earth bursts out in broad daylight.

The cold packs the men and women of the North into stone huts full of holes. Cold is not fear. Everything always returns to the interior in order to rebuild itself differently. Certainly, children are made in the same way in burrows as in a qarmat in the North, there's no secret there. But in an isolated hut, below the falls and the cold, in a break in the rock, in the heart of a fever that might be lethal, the arms wrapped in pleasure speak of mountains, of forests and of all the earth.

It is the sky that embraces the earth and it is the earth that sings in the ear of the sky. The true migrator never returns to the same village. The migrating man, the Innu, the Inuit, is just plain man, who contains everything and is contained in everything.

## Thirteen

I had lost track of time.

How many days and nights had the fever of Arvik and Shashauan lasted? I can't say. The children had harpooned ten fish, rather small, but delicious. But between each fish, how many steps had the sun taken in the clouds? I don't know.

Silattuq and Nuliaq had climbed onto the plateau. They really had seen a herd of musk-oxen completely absorbed in the new grass. They had walked around a small isolated group, hoping to surprise it on the east side in order to drive it into the canyon to the west. Then I was distracted and I began thinking about the song of the earth...

And now I'm landing there on my branch. I'm observing.

\* \* \*

The gray and pink overcast that crushed the qarmat, that forced the fever back on the lovers, that nearly carried them off, this beast finally deigned to lift its heavy buttocks and withdraw with the vapors of the falls. It was morning.

The air was like crystal. Panik and Irniq had played with a puppy they harnessed to a dead branch. One could see the tracks. They were like very fresh and empty young memories. A little further away, the dog team, still harnessed, licked their chops. They had eaten all the fish heads and tails that the children had given them. Now they wanted to sleep; they howled to make the falls be quiet. The thunder of the water falling pell-mell in its own white froth slammed into the footprints on the snow.

And then Arvik finally came out of the qarmat. He let the cold nibble his naked body's moisture for a moment and, when he was dry, he went back in to bite Shashauan's toes. And she too emerged from the hut to let herself be licked by the breeze that turned around her.

Around the qarmat, the sun played in the crystallizing air. A soft wind emphasized the mildness of the air, into which an almost totally evaporated odor had filtered.

The lovers were unable to notice anything..

Arvik got dressed. Shashauan did the same. In a final spike of fever, they dozed off in spite of themselves.

When they did go out again, the breeze was singing. They didn't notice anything. Moreover, there was nothing to notice. A big bubble of happiness rose from the black lake. Fish were drying on the rocks. The dogs were finally silent; they were sleeping in each others' odor. The other dogs must have been running far away with Silattuq, Nuliaq and the children.

Spring was opening its doors. Everywhere, tufts of grass were shaking their hair on the rocks. Up on the plateau, the lichen was breaking stone, no doubt, with the help of its balls of colors. And great sheets of space were being liberated from the ice. Yes! Up there on the rocky plateaus, some very large blocks of solitude were being stretched in every direction.

Arvik half-opened the bearskin that served as the qarmat's door. He wanted to say something, but his words remained in his mouth like a swarm of wasps.

All of a sudden, with no other warning than that a knife was not in its place, Silattuq's knife that ought to have been there, but wasn't there, an emptiness planted its teeth in Arvik's chest. *Ouch!*

\* \* \*

Arvik had been sucked in by the emptiness like water into the abyss. He had fallen into his interior, into the pipe of the words he hadn't been able to say. He was now in free fall in his choking throat; claws were tearing at its walls; the breath of the beast carrying him off stank of decomposition.

"Ataata!" Arvik cried. "Anaana!" he cried again after a harrowing silence.

And Shashauan felt the air withdraw from her mouth and nose as if it had departed with Arvik's two cries. Then all of her body was sucked in also. She plunged into the beast's saliva; she couldn't breathe any longer.

However, nothing was quieter than the mists that rose from the canyon. The warm air came softly in under their coats, caressed the thighs of the falls and laughed above the thunder. From where I was, I saw clumps of blue sky fall just about everywhere like very big petals. The mist, no longer having a place, took off with a great flapping of wings, and the canyon redrew itself in the sea of rocks.

Arvik and Shashauan shone in the crystallized air. There was no greater beauty in this world than this gap which detached them from each other, compressed each one into their individual hearts, and in these hearts broke stones to make fire.

Blades lit up the faces and distinguished them from each other. Nothing else resembled these two faces that had suddenly become unique. A bolt of lightning had fallen to the bottom of the earth and climbed back up their spines. Now they were two torches. And the tips of their flames went all over the land to probe the extent of the absence.

They were free at last. We don't always notice it, but we are born of different acts of dismemberment.

\* \* \*

Arvik untied the three dogs, which immediately began sniffing, their noses in the absence, in the characteristic odor of those no longer there. But they didn't go back up on the plateau: they went downstream along the canyon instead, walking on the scree. They were following an odor that had become increasingly obvious to Arvik's nose. Shashauan didn't know this smell, one which stung the nostrils, opening them as it widened their blood vessels, cleared the bronchial tubes, yet, all during this time, stuck a finger in the throat, creating nausea.

Arvik shouted to restrain the dogs, for they had thrown themselves on bodies with fur that was thick and nearly black. He was forced to tie them up, for they wanted to make a meal of the frightening flesh that was there. He was able to distinguish the heads. Coiled horns came

out of the thick fur. Arvik looked at the cliff, starting at his feet and all the way up to the blue hair of the sky.

The musk-oxen had thrown themselves down from up there.

Arvik was crushed by the weight of the animals, by the meaning of the fall, by the torn flesh, by the fur saturated with blood. He sat down on a stone in front of the oxen. Both hands in the absence that choked him. Food was there, months of food, but no one returned from the hunt. No one.

The Inuit didn't shout. Shashauan remained on the edge of the abyss.

Together, they took the two animals apart, slowly, very slowly, for beneath them was a terrifying "perhaps". One hand held the other back, for one wanted to find and the other didn't. And the animals were enormous. Arvik carefully cut each slice. A sacred food, at an enormous price.

Shashauan deposited the slices on the stone to dry them. And the sun turned all its strength toward this, as in an oven for melting fat, as if it had placed the cliff and each of its stones in the form of an oven so as to extract the maximum amount of water and sweep it off into its blue immensity.

But there was nothing under the animals, a nothing that was blood drunk by the lichen. Even this must not be abandoned. The lichen gorged with blood was rolled up and left to dry. The skins were scraped. And the days passed.

\* \* \*

His eyes went here and there to see who was coming, who was leaving, but only the light came, and only it went away again, tearing Arvik's heart more and more.

Shashauan and he went to look for the canoes. They gathered all the equipment together. And they sat down on a stone.

Two heads around emptiness, two faces leaning over the emptiness of the center as if over a kudlik.

\* \* \*

The sun came and went, erasing all the gray forms which might have moved or spoken.

The nights shouted silences of death.

It didn't rain. One might have said that a wolf, suffocated by solitude, had drowned in its howling. In the sky, a star was bleeding, strangled by immense spots of darkness. A pale faint light flowed slowly on the earth.

\* \* \*

After I don't know how long a time, Arvik went up toward the plateau. Shashauan stayed behind.

The hunter advanced over the rocky plateau. He realized that everywhere he went, he was at the center. He couldn't manage to leave the center. If he moved, the whole landscape moved with him. It was a horrible sensation.

Before the musk-oxen fell, he was somewhere in the circle, but never in the center. There was Silattuq, there was Nuliaq, there were the children; no one ever occupied the center. They were always somewhere in a triangle or in a pentagon, close to an angle and clearly situated and if someone moved the Nitassinan did not move. The geography of immobility: to the north, very distant, the village; to the south, very distant, the forest; both invisible, hidden behind the horizon... But no matter! the angles of the triangle were moving inside this, going nearer or farther away from each other. Now, space had lost the stake that held it, it moved in an indifferent circle and he, Arvik, remained in the center, like a lamentation.

He moved his solitude toward the north and toward the south, but he couldn't move himself in his solitude, which formed a hoop around him. And all this empty and firmly attached to him as if his body had gutted the center of the drum, and it formed a rigid garment around him, a skin stretched to the breaking point, vibrating and yet empty. Not empty of something, for all the things were still there, but empty of what makes one thing interesting rather than another.

The hunter went all around the circle with his glassy eyes...

Everywhere, the absence was equally distributed. Silattuq and Nuliaq could arrive from any point on the periphery, but above all it could be that they would not arrive at all. This equal distribution in each point of the horizon was alarming. Each point, black or white, gathered up in him all the virtual presence and all the realized absence, never one more than the other. This infernal equality was nothing more than an immense trap, and Arvik was struggling inside it.

\* \* \*

At some point he stopped struggling.

Impossible to choose a direction: everywhere he gazed, he could see that no one was coming.

Shashauan had sat down to one side, huddled in a deathly silence.

Arvik continued to look around the horizon, and nothing, absolutely nothing stood out from the sameness. Not even Shashauan. The coincidence of presence and absence had smoothed the horizon so perfectly that the hunter was unable to get out of the trap. Everything was so equally possible and so equally impossible that there was no way out.

The landscape no longer had any meaning. It was green and white, blue and pink spots, barely detached from a fatal gray. It was useless for the sun to be born in the east and die in the west, the North could surely continue to spit cold and the South, mild air... all this made no difference to him now. The sun's trajectory no longer cut space in two, it wasn't possible any more to see the difference between birth, which always ended up by lying down in death,

and death which always ended up spitting its empty and identical dawn. It was a boring record, an absolute indifference.

What good is all this plateau of cold snow, if it no longer produces one direction, and one alone...

Then Shashauan staked her all: she began to sing and dance around her man. She peppered the horizon with the burns of her presence. She burned all the wick of the horizon. Many-colored smokes came out of it, and unknown smells. And her song burst the belly of silence. From it, a lamentation came, red as the throat of someone sick with fever.

But Arvik's gaze passed through the circle of fire. For him, this circle was violently thin and transparent, a false wall, an illusion as empty as the air. It was no more than a thin layer of ice that the light held up to scorn.

\* \* \*

The surface of the territory began to change dramatically. To tell up from down was no longer possible, for all the light was equally shared in each point of the sphere. And the hunter was stiffening. Since he wasn't moving, the landscape didn't move either.

Arvik disappeared into his own sphere.

Shashauan fired her final arrow.

"It's your fault!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

But Arvik didn't take hold of the pole. He passed underneath her yelling, drawing his limbs back toward him like a turtle.

Had he taken hold of the pole, had he said to himself: "It is because of me", all of the circle would have found a meaning and a direction. "I am the fault, so everything else is innocent." To acquit the world by designating oneself as guilty, that is an extraordinary differentiation. "And it's me, the difference!" The suffering would have finally found a cause, death would have found a grave, there would have been a bad and ugly point of reference in the circle of beauty. He might have been able to say: "This is good, because that is bad." The world would have found a face. This would have been a genesis, a founding act, a burrow of security. After that act, suffering would have been a grimace, joy a smile. Tshakapesh would have been the good, Atshen the evil. And he, Arvik, the tiny point of the center, might just as well be Atshen, for if not, it is the whole universe that would open its great swallowing and assimilating maw.

Arvik might have had to kill someone. And then there would be vengeance, and a history of the human race would have begun with its trace of blood in the crystal of being.

But he, the Inuit, didn't want to take hold of that pole. Too easy a help for a suffering that had become precious to him. He did not want to become the first murderer in a sick lineage.

He hadn't understood.

Shashauan hadn't meant: "It's your fault if they're dead. You should have gone to help them. You were partying with your woman while they were hunting for their children. And you let them die..." She had never thought that. She was my granddaughter, an Innu of the bird people, a gentle swallow. She simply meant to say: "It is you who are making the world empty by stopping what you are doing. And the world depends on what you are doing. I'm not saying that it is waiting for your action in order to be: it is waiting for your action in order to have a value. The one who doesn't love cannot hate, not even himself. So sorrow is everywhere, and forms disappear in its whiteness. It is the song of the white earth."

But nothing lit up in Arvik's heart. He remained caught in the trap. The suffering in him was diluted, and this was all he was looking for. He wanted to be digested. Digestion is never a misfortune for the one who suffers, it is his hope. What he fears is to live one day longer.

\* \* \*

Why hadn't he gone to look for the bodies? If he had found a body, the knife would have reached the heart, the hemorrhage would have been fatal. He would have died and so have been able to live again and taste his new freedom. But he didn't want to tempt fate...

The whole circle of absence was transformed. Arvik no longer saw anything but an immense carrion-eater; he was in its enormous and infinite throat.

When the dance of a woman leaves the circle of the world indifferent and no man moves toward her, it is the woman who is in danger of disappearing. For what good is a universe if it doesn't award her any value? A man's erection directed toward her is not only the beginning of a new life: it is the salvation of a world awakened through her.

Shashauan could die anywhere, but not under Arvik's indifferent gaze.

She no longer had any other choice. She tied the three dogs in a triangle around her man with good ropes attached to moderately heavy stones. The hungrier they were, the more they would threaten the hunter. Either he would wake up, or be swallowed in their maws. The dogs would save him or slit his throat.

She went back down into the canyon. She put one of the canoes in the water, deposited half of the provisions in it and set off for the great lake.

She had to be the Innu, she alone, the point of departure, the pure origin. And we, all the ancestors, in her.

# TOWARD THE SOUTH

## One

From the standpoint of width, the Unipek slept between two distant mountainous hems. From the standpoint of length, one's eyes got lost, for upstream the lake was just a widening of the great river of the falls, and downstream it narrowed to form a bottleneck opening on the ocean.

On this strange inner sea, Shashauan's canoe shone like a star in the night. The water meditated, motionless. The little boat meditated, motionless. In regard to the width of the lake, it was just about in the middle that it had stopped to gather its thoughts. But in regard to its length, it remained in a big sandy bay, round and nearly enclosed by necks of gravel.

The winds had departed. A dead silence covered the brushed surface of the water. On the lookout, the shores pricked up their ears. Small rivers flowed into this bay, but she didn't hear them. Shashauan's mind flowed back on itself. The canoe had gone to sleep. A reflection as thin as a hair met the shore to the south, landed there, and tied itself to a stump that was still in pain, a stone axe planted between its lips. All the saline bay resembled a slate broken by this crack of silver.

From time to time, desires to hold on more day came to Shashauan. She pierced the silence crushing her with a moan. The tune of a song spread out, but no word dared run over the water. Shashauan's gaze left the canoe and followed the silver thread of the reflection, but drowned long before reaching the stump.

The motionlessness took form again. And the egg of the night closed its shell again.

Why did she, from time to time, want to survive one more day?

Her reasoning was as simple as an amputation: if our noses are glued to a landscape, all the lines of its face move, arrive and depart like waves on a lake. We understand nothing about it. Only an insane person would be attached to these lines which come and go, tearing at the heart. So we decide sometimes to unglue our noses from the navel of things by two or three great flappings of our wings. At a certain distance, the face of the landscape speaks. All in all, we must take everything. And in order to take everything, we must let everything escape from our hands. The eyes need not only light, but distance also. If not, we find ourselves with fangs that tear our bellies, and nothing remains in memory but a plateau of snow, and in the middle of the plateau a stubborn young Inuit hunter between three dogs.

\* \* \*

At the same moment, very far from there, in a great circle of snow and rage, the young Inuit reached the same conclusion. He dropped what he was holding in his fist. And the silence made his mind clear and free.

He understood at exactly the same time as Shashauan: Silattuq had persuaded Nuliaq to return to the village with the children, leaving their son to his honeymoon. For if not, he would never be an Inuit, a man born of the ice.

In reality, the young hunter had been prepared for this. He had simply forgotten that this moment could only arrive on the day when he wouldn't feel ready. Otherwise, he would have relied on himself, while now he had to rely on the great plateau of snow that pressed him down on the same spot, at the center and beginning of himself.

A dog had broken its rope. Starving, it turned all its fangs on the Inuit. The light broke on its teeth.

Arvik woke up. He was entirely at that spot the dog was looking at, drooling with appetite for its master. The dog's eyes pierced the night; Arvik's knife pierced the dog.

\* \* \*

Shashauan caught sight of a sea bird, a tern. Thanks to it, the Innu woman gained altitude. Now she saw, if not the whole lake, at least all the great bay, and the gravel necks, and further away the other part of the lake, which grew breathless as it ran toward the sea. To the north, between the ears of the mountains, a gravelly stretch of water flowed. Through the clumps of black spruce, skin tents could be seen, caribou antlers, whale bones, and poles holding birchbark pales. A little girl was bathing as her grandfather watched. A small child was dipping pieces of fish in the sand before plunging them into his mouth. Hooked to a big black spruce, five Canada geese were hanging head downward, their wings falling open. Water was heating on a fire.

Above the Innu village, the sky had swollen and formed a kind of large blister. The pus in the blister thickened all that it touched. The bark and the trunks seemed to sway; the branches were beaten back against the trunks; the colors trembled. They weren't trees any more, one might have said they were algae undulating in a sea of blue gelatin.

In order to remake the forms disappearing in the jelly, the swallow blinked its eyes. The village returned, was erased, tried again, and smiled. Farther off, much farther off, at the mouth of the Unipek, near the seacoast, was another small Innu village, tiny, but happy.

Families just as much Innu as Tshiashk. It was too great a hope. When the swallow took its place on Shashauan's left shoulder again, the vision was already lying down under the fur of her dreams.

\* \* \*

All of the Unipek had gotten up in a good mood. Head in the stars, elbows on its knees, it reflected as it drank its big bowl of water. But it was only a very small child. Beneath it, the crust of stone rose in its turn, winding a gigantic shoreline of mountains around the child-lake's shoulders. And under the crust of stone, the sea of fire rose up also, closing its flames on the earth and the stars.

Underneath, Tshakapesh was chasing atshens as he turned a big barrel of fire. Then, colors lifted colors and let them drop on the barrel. And then, repeatedly, in ever-widening layers, circles rose to envelop circles.

Underneath, the giant of totality stayed quietly in bed. He breathed, and all the worlds fell back upon each other. His heart beat in the drum of the spheres, a deep and muted, scarcely audible sound.

Shashauan felt his presence. Her heart pulsed in the drum. And that's all there is.

\* \* \*

Why had she only woken up at night, never during the day? And why for such a short time? And why dreams bigger than the lake?

Certainly, she was dying of thirst, and the desire to live came to her only at distant intervals, like the jump of a fish on a lake without flies. She had swallowed a little salt water, and fatigue was pulling all her limbs to the bottom of the canoe. The thumb and index of her dreams had relaxed, and Arvik had fallen out of the picture.

He could no longer be the territory of her trust. Everything had grown too big.

At night, everyone sleeps, or stares at a kudlik. At night, we can't grasp any particular feature of a face. We find ourselves in the bottom of things. And then breathing takes the rhythm of the great drum. We live by lack of death. Nothing holds on to life any more. Life, nonetheless, does not let go of us.

Everything seems indifferent. But it isn't! The drum vibrates dully as it recreates the world. Everything changes, we can no longer grab hold of the same things, but the bottom rumbles and holds everything in its life. We may want death, but no one has invented it yet.

Because of this, how good it was to dissolve in a great lake!

How crazy and horrible it was to wake up thirsty!

In the evening, however, and all night and even at dawn, the thin reflection of a silver hair that had wrapped itself around a stump on the south shore, opposite the village, pulled the Innu woman's canoe as well as it could. A little more and it would have broken. So it went at it slowly, by using patience, like a fishing line too fragile for the fish caught on it. It was simply a matter of wearing down the canoe's resistance, of leading it gently. Of taking advantage of the absence of wind.

\* \* \*

The canoe let itself go.

So it happened that it got stuck in the mud on the south shore, a few steps from the stump, a few steps from a pool of water that had separated from the marsh and was reaching out for the boat. And when the impossibility of death seemed sufficiently clear and sure, the pool tugged at Shashauan's arm, led her into its body of water, and gave her some of it to drink.

Was it water? Wasn't it blood instead? It was like blood that wanted a body, that wanted it to have blood. They were two needs that had found their way, two halves of dead persons who wanted to join in each other in order to breathe.

The sky and the earth breathed like a single being in its drum. It went there by the thousand rivers and the thousand arteries down to the smallest capillaries, it planted its springtime there, and all things began to want to drink a little more again. And the pool of water swallowed Shashauan, and Shashauan swallowed the pool of water, and the circle closed as it formed again, and the world was ready to start out again for another dance on the same drum. The great tent.

And so it was, it would be her faithful lover. All the rest would play out between the lines of her face.

\* \* \*

The water finally opened her eyes on the world. A cloud of mosquitoes murmured around Shashauan's skin. The woman's back was still asleep in the mud, but her hands flew around like birds swallowing flies. "Flies are what I swallow." And her belly opened up because of this.

She wanted to get loose and had to abandon her clothes, sucked in by the mud. She dove naked into the sea to wash herself and drive away the mosquitoes. Clouds of little fish played in fingers of light.

She got out of the water, sat down on her canoe to eat a piece of musk-ox. The sun threw itself upon her to cover her nakedness, for eyes were watching.

She chewed, swallowed, and in one of the moments of silence separating mouthfuls, she heard something like a moan. Turning her head, she saw the axe planted between the lips of the stump. All her dreams poured into her mind in one single waterfall of forms. The Innu village with the little girl and the grandfather tumbled down out of her dreams.

She had come ashore on the side opposite the village! Why?

Shashauan felt clearly that an answer to this question did exist, but that it was further away, that it would come at its own time, that it would do no good to call for it now.

She heard the moan again. She got up, landed in the mud, walked in the moan's direction. The light covered her beauty.

Sunk to the waist in the marsh was an Innu man. His face said: "Kill me." His face said: "Save me." Nothing was clearer than these two faces contradicting each other on the same countenance.

That made her burst out laughing, for if an Innu hunter had appeared to her that very morning, she would have told him: "Kill me." She would have told him: "Save me." It was the fundamental human vacillation. And she couldn't stop herself from laughing. For it was so beautiful, that foundation, so incredibly solid, a sort of rock forever closed beneath her

feet by the ball-and-socket joint of yes and no. The impossibility of a definitive life or a definitive death.

Even so, it wasn't easy to pull the man out of the marsh. His torso was like a big knotty yellow birch and, even though the top of his body wanted to come out, all the lower part was sucked in by the marsh.

She cried out, fell on her backside, and tore the man out of his marsh. He yelled, then fainted. He was missing half of one leg. It was bound with a tourniquet above the knee.

It was then that the answer came. A purely Innu answer. The man had been attacked by an atshen. He had fought back, and well, but the beast had left with his leg. The family had treated him, and now it was for fate to decide. The marsh was the only possible cure: the clay kills or cures. In arm's reach, there was a bark basket, and meat in the basket. From time to time, someone came to see what the marsh had decided. And the canoe had reflected at length on this subject. It had approached slowly. And the man had moaned when he heard someone. It was he who had thrown the pool of water toward the canoe with the swallow sign in order to revive the one who could save him.

The man had lost consciousness, but his hand held Shashauan's hand with a will all the stronger because his desire for death had fainted with him.

She had only one thing left to do. She pulled the man to the sea and washed him until he awoke. He managed to catch the edge of the canoe and slide along it up to his waist in the water. She pushed him and he rolled into the bottom. She went to look for the furs that remained in the mud. She piled them into the canoe.

Then she sailed off, following the shore. She stopped at a spot where a brook flowed into the Unipek. There were masses of brookside flowers there which she knew and that could cure.

## Two

His name was Edechewe (The one who is always travelling around the world). He was a force of nature. He was married, had four children, led the whale hunts in the autumn, spoke in the council... All this was finished. An atshen had eaten his leg. The rest of his body was going to feed the marsh.

Shashauan wanted to keep this remnant of an Innu for herself. He had good arms, a good head, he could scrape skins, prepare fish for drying, sew good clothing, watch over the child she was carrying, satisfy her carnal need in the warm days, show her the good hunting grounds, provide her with a family connection to the village, and he wouldn't go away, he wouldn't without any warning stick himself in the emptiness of the dead...

Healing his stump was something nearly done already. The marsh had accomplished half the work. The plants would do the rest. But how to amputate his pride as a hunter without leaving him at a loss? How to replant him in his village so that a new dignity would flourish?

\* \* \*

After the atshen had taken his leg, his companions in the hunt had placed a tourniquet on his thigh and brought him back to the village. They had wept. The next day, the family had loaded him in a canoe and crossed the lake. They had sunk him in the marsh up to the waist. And they had wept. On returning to the village, they had wept a third time.

Tshakapesh was going to decide.

The Innu had prepared himself to die in his marsh. He had clearly seen that the winds of the Uinipek had withdrawn into the mountains. The silence of the dead had settled on the mirror of the lake. The marsh, profiting from this, had sung rather cheerfully: the chirring of the crickets, the boiling of the *croo-oaks* of the frogs, the *tee-oo* of the snow buntings, the nasalizations of the guillemots and ducks, and over it all the buzzing of the flies. The cord of sounds had left no respite; it had wound around a slow and sure respiration, for the silence of the Uinipek had formed the biggest ear that had ever been seen on a Nitassinan. All the noises had been vacuumed up, all the moans had been sucked in, the water had collected, absorbed, and meditated on them. The fish had caught the bubbles and taken them even more deeply into the water.

Edechewe had quieted down, the moans had weakened, and the Uinipek had gone to sleep beneath the sky. With the limbs left to him, his torso, his head, the two ends of his soul and its components, Edechewe formed the quietest animal in the marsh.

At times his eyes had awoken, stretched, lifted, and shot upward. They had danced here and there. "Why has no ancestor arrived yet?" his eyes had asked. And they had pirouetted to the lake, had run on the reflections, then returned; they had closed their lids and gone to sleep again.

At that moment the dreams took over. It was almost always a time in the village, a feast, a cooking fire, nothing else, no ancestor, no dwarf, no giant, just his wife, his children, his brother, someone from the group of hunters, the people of the village.

At times, the pain of his leg had chewed his whole body. A horrible chewing. But the smell hadn't revealed the end of the business. The marsh had always emitted a good smell: grass, flowers, earth, water, everything had been perfumed with freshness. At a certain point, however, the forces of rot were going to prevail over the healing forces. It had to be. He couldn't imagine himself dependent on his wife and his children. All he had to do was to stop eating. Moreover, he had neither eaten nor drunk for a long time. For his part, the choice had been made. He would have the right to a hunter's burial, to a high platform, to the deliverance of the birds, to an honorable place in the memory of the village.

But the wait had stretched out. The dreams had festered, bears had come into the feast, wolves, foxes, walrus, and otters of every kind; his nightmares' thousand tentacles had strangled each other: fighting, suckings, bites, tearings, cracks, and then suddenly a lull, no! something worse: he had seen his wife cook some fish, and she had given it to him to eat as if he were a baby.

One night his eyes had ventured further. They had gone away to beat their wings on the great silent air in order to hear the last word of the story. The memories had been clear: they were spread out on the water as if on a strip of bark engraved by the point of a knife. Everything had led him to understand the whale. He was the man-whale. Long ago, an Inuit family had come to teach him the art of hunting on the sea. As soon as his kayak had slid for the first time on the eastern ocean, he had perceived the mammal's presence. It was he, the teenaged Innu, who had guided the Inuit father and son toward the animal. The paddle had led the kayak to the heart of a school of krill, and he, the young hunter, had heard immediately the song of the great whale who encloses the world: the bulging envelope that contains the world and whose palate keeps the stars alive, the great dwelling-place. He had perceived the vibration of its great globular skull, which had shaken its blue flesh and pushed the clouds away. He had understood its stormy mood and its calming breezes. It hadn't always been easy for it to contain this quarrelsome world: pillaging birds, and unbalanced oafs who crawl too low.

And the great whale, the tent of all the dwelling-places, the uits of all the Nitassinans, had openly expressed itself; it had designated one of its little ones for him to take care of, introduce into the inner sky of the village, into the life of the village, its loves and its joys. And the piece he had kept for himself, oh well! may it glorify his hunter's soul.

"Do around you what I am doing for you inside me", the supreme whale, the primal egg had told him.

This instruction had come to him with the art of the kayak, through an Inuit family that had impressed his soul. Now he had heard it with his own ears: "Do around you what I am doing for you inside me."

He had engraved all this on the strip of bark that had unrolled on the great lake and today was the memory of his life. But the strip hadn't stopped in the jaws of the bear, a leg torn off and hurled through the hole of the stars. No! the strip of bark had continued, much thinner, but perceptible, a hair, a hair of silver on the lake's shining slate. And the luminous hair had held a small Innu canoe from another country. Not only had it held the canoe with the swallow sign, it had brought it toward him.

Whatever its form, its thickness and its color may have been, this hair could only have been one of the hairs of Tshakapesh, who was always laughing in his beard, and no one had ever been able to separate in this laughter the mischievousness of the child from the mockery of the adolescent.

The canoe had approached.

It was at that moment that he felt all his body being thrown outside his body, like a hare skin turned over and torn off. And the body outside his skin had crawled to the canoe and extended its hand. To his immense surprise, a woman had come out of the canoe. She too was dying. She too was outside her own flesh. She too was pulled to the pool of water, had rolled in the water and drunk the water's blood. The water had cured her.

He who had come out of the marsh, he who a short time ago had been swallowed up in the pain of a leg he no longer had, he had revived a dying woman! Life had come out of him and been given to a woman dead from thirst. The silver hair that had united them surely was one of the hairs of Tshakapesh. The good old man had connected the two halves of death so that they gave each other life. And now, Tshakapesh was laughing in his beard.

\* \* \*

But all this had been experienced in a much too clear light, with a certitude of ice, on a perfectly lucid mirror. A perfect moment.

And yet, when the hunter had felt himself drawn by a totally unknown Innu woman, stark naked, who planted her eyes in his body as if in a piece of meat, when he understood that he could no longer get up by himself, he completely lost it. Tshakapesh had done nothing more than play one of his dirty tricks. He hadn't been awakened on the side of the stars: he was being scraped once again on the side of rocks, mud and hunger, this time with no defense, and minus a leg.

Desperate, the hunter returned to the war of his dreams and didn't want to leave it any more. He had fainted.

Time went fishing, in no hurry. It had its plan.

\* \* \*

Edechewe awoke in a very clean tent, lifted up by a smell of fir, covered by a supple and shiny bearskin. He felt so light that it seemed to him that his body was made of feathers. In the middle of his uitsh there hung, upside down, a spray of dried flowers in a wreath of Tshakapesh's beard. In a circle of stone, some ashes were smoking. Suspended from a pole, a basket was pouring out the smell of a strange meat he couldn't identify. The bark on the poles was fresh. The opening was closed with a beautiful caribou skin.

He slid his hand along his thigh, went down toward the knee and clenched his fist in the emptiness. His heart spit in its pains.

He still was not at the celestial end of the totemic reed. He was loitering somewhere between the two ends.

Driven into the ground beside the bed of fir, two big canes were waiting for him. He could hold them in his fist, and an edge went up toward the elbow; a very precise bit of work with birch branches that were doubtless not easy to find given their shape, perfectly adapted to their use.

Edechewe looked at the canes for a long time. Did he want to live? Did his stomach want to eat? Did his heart want to beat? Did his muscles want to awaken? Did his leg want to survive the death of its twin? He consulted with himself.

But during this time his arms had grabbed hold of the canoes and dragged them outside.

All the trees were covered with Tshakapesh's beard, even the aspens and the birches. What joke was this?

There, on a porous stone, was his axe and a pipe of yellow birch inlaid with a bear tooth. On another stone, some smoking herb. Further away, a clearing with brook flowers. What was this shaman's décor?

He settled down to smoke the herb. His body disintegrated like a fog bitten by the sun, and a smile began to crack on his face.

He had to admit it: Tshakapesh had chosen.

\* \* \*

The healing that had passed through his body now wanted to go on around him, through his hands, his eyes, his ears, his nose and all the openings of his heart. The price had been high but without this price would he have been able to slip his pride into this new skin of healer?

### Three

A morning clear as crystal settled down on the sea. From the south shore of the lake where the new shaman's magical camp was, a large bark canoe could be seen in the distance, cleaving proudly through the water as it followed the shore from west to east. A woman examined the shore of the lake, four children followed her gaze and, in the rear, Edechewe's brother, Uapush, the hare, worked the paddle. He seemed anxious.

The family passed in front of the flowery clearing, but it was blinded by the glare of the light. Uapush paddled on.

Edechewe watched them pass. He liked to see them without being seen. He didn't budge. He let the silence work. The canoe disappeared behind a point, then came back out to return to its path.

It was strange, all these gazes that scanned the shore with too much force, squeezed the thickets into a ball, crumpled the foliage, worked so hard that they could see nothing of what was there. They were eyes that created blindness.

Edechewe understood that these eyes didn't want to find him. They were holding back something they didn't want to see.

The woman's hand joined Uapush's hand. He was confirming his brother's disappearance by following the river's shore, and he was succeeding at it perfectly. He had seen that his brother

was no longer in the marsh, but he hadn't seen the tracks of a woman and the trail of a foot. He had seen in the marsh a larger than usual hole, like a hollowed-out space, but he hadn't seen that the axe was no longer set in the stump. He had followed the shore while allowing himself to be dazzled by the light, never looking in the shadows. He filled the holes, he fled the clues. The woman forced herself to stay inside the image Uapush was drawing. As for the children, they observed the fish that turned around the canoe.

Edechewe, for his part, let his own vision work. And it did work. It even worked on both sides of the world.

On the outer side of things, Edechewe didn't have much to do: he simply saw what was happening, and left it intact. A brother's hand touching his wife's hand is everything and nothing. But from the inner side, Edechewe worked with his knife, he chiseled his memories, he sculpted them anew: a colossal work. He had to return to the facts. One morning when he had returned from the hunt, he had surprised Uapush giving his wife some bark tea. One night, he had found his brother next to his wife, he was warming her feet...

Edechewe reconsidered all these attentions. Uapush had never hunted at the same time as he did, it was all about helping the family. He was always with the children... He truly was a brother very attentive to his family!

After he had seen this, Edechewe felt that he no longer was a husband; he was no longer even a father.

His brother had a very beautiful family, a wife whom he loved and who loved him, children who were no doubt his own by family ties and perhaps by blood. The family circle was sufficient unto itself. He, Edechewe, had never missed a hunt, had slept in the forest most of the time, had never liked anything as much as observing the blowing of the whales down at the mouth of the Unipek's gut, three days by canoe from the village. Now he understood the tightening of his wife's thighs on the rare occasions when he took her sexually.

Edechewe smiled. It was very funny, this turn of events. What especially pleased him was seeing the detachment he had always felt for his family. He saw that he was indifferent, and this indifference no longer caused him any uneasiness. What had been a weight had become a relief.

In fact, he never had found any difference between all the village's families. They were all just as beautiful, each in their own way, all mismatched seen from certain angles, all pleasant at some times, all of them unpleasant at others; it might have been said that they were knots of winds on a placid sea, clusters of noises buzzing in his ears. He preferred the wide open spaces and a whale's fluid movement.

His wife had jumped at the chance to take pleasure in the best hunter and the best lover. She had gotten both. Was it her fault if these two men were not the same?

Edechewe realized that he had never had any preference either for families or for women... He preferred water and salt. A whale is so clear... Everything becomes bubbles of water

when the whale exposes its tail to dive into the depths of the ocean. Its mind is concentrated on the bubbling of misfortunes and honors. Encapsulated, these float away. The whale dives. The whale resurfaces. It has seen the bottom, it has seen the night, not the night of the stars, but the muted night of the rumblings of the depths of the drum, and it returns from it replete and happy.

Whoever has had that experience no longer has anything to do with noise and the different families of noise. These are only bubbles.

The whale testifies to the depth. It could return from it desperate, but it returns from it satisfied. This satisfaction is what a hunter would feel if his foot were supported so that he could travel at last into all his being, into the deepest places of his being, there where life returns into its own interior.

Uapush's canoe set out again for the open water, with his wife and his children.

The backs of the man and the woman formed something like the wings of a pigeon, and the children the feathers of its tail. The whale hunter laughed: he was delivered from his family. In the past he had built a life in the village. It was a weight, it was a lie. The weight and the lie went away with the canoe.

●\* \* \*

Edechewe awoke.

The winds had thrown themselves on the salt lake, furious and black. The sky trembled like a caribou shaking its fur. The rain flooded the fire circle through the smoke hole. The bark, shaken on every edge and every side, was held to the poles by the claws of its seams.

Why was it that he didn't feel alone? Why was he so sure that someone was there, quite near, taking care of everything?

Now the wind was throwing water everywhere, you could hear branches breaking, the tent held on with both hands so as not to fly off with the seagulls, and he knew that it was only a game, one of Tshakapesh's pranks, he who so much liked to make men afraid in order to arrange everything his way afterwards.

The three-footed one went to sleep in the great whale's arms.

\* \* \*

In the morning, the wind had quieted down. Edechewe grabbed hold of his canes, went out of the tent and hopped down to the sea. He liked this new way of walking. He felt unique, the only three-footed one in the region.

A small canoe bobbed on the shore. It wasn't a canoe from the village; it bore the sign of the swallow. Inside, there was a paddle, some provisions and a caribou bladder full of water. At the stern, a clump of Tshakapesh's beard was wrapped around three flowers.

He set out for the village.

A beautiful warm day. The canoe slid rather badly, it pulled from behind as if a seal's carcass had been hooked onto it. Bubbles formed at the stern, but there was no seal. It was no doubt because the hunter's arms still hadn't regained all their strength and his one leg was having a little difficulty in rediscovering the balance of movement. And the bubbles? One of Tshakapesh's tricks. And the reed that came to the water's surface? He hadn't seen it.

The crossing lasted all day.

As it was setting, the sun held back between two mountains, not wanting to miss any of the spectacle. The canoe went on toward the village. The resistance had left it. One stroke of the paddle made it glide like a happy duck. It was now clearly visible from the village.

Edechewe's head and torso could be plainly seen coming out of the boat. A superb torso, a quiet gaze.

The man savored the evening's serenity. The sun softened between its two mountains. The yellow yolk of an egg slipped over the people of the village. Each person in the village approached the shore, their faces yellow with truth. Edechewe saw gestures, watched the jaws budge, saw all kinds of movements, looks, twisting of lips, but he didn't hear anything. A noise of mouths reached his ears, but it was just noise. The looks spoke, even shouted, and he understood them as well as a mother understands her baby's grimaces.

Deaf to the words coming out of the mouths, he could understand the faces. He had passed from lies to the truth.

Everything could happen; it would never be anything more than a little bit of nothing, of nothing at all, for he would remain in the big blue whale of the sky and the earth with Tshakapesh for a friend. Play a whole village if you want, play forever, it will never be anything but a few bubbles in the corner of a lip.

He saw the smile strain hard on his wife's lips and finally raise its two points like the mustache of a seal. And his brother release his hand from the hand he had pressed out of fear. And the astonished children. And everyone dumbfounded. And the village paralyzed in the reddening yellow of the sun.

Tshakapesh was laughing so hard that no one heard him, and all the serious faces made the sun crack into a great guffaw, so that, in a rumble of laughter and tears, it all of a sudden tipped over to the other side of the horizon.

The water formed a wave under the canoe, and it approached the village without the paddle touching the lake. A reed came out of the water behind the canoe and pushed it. The whale-man was not surprised that he was advancing by his desire alone. All things were natural to him now. When he stood up on his canes and jumped ashore and walked toward his wife, there was so much dignity in his strange steps that no one managed to move.

And he simply said:

“Don't be afraid, I'm not a ghost, I want to do outside of me what has been done inside me.”

Everyone understood that a healer had arrived in the village. They made him an uitsh in a clearing a few steps away from his family.

## Four

Two moons had passed since Edechewe's return to the village.

Summer baked the stones that slept in front of the uitsh of the three-footed one. There was no better, no lighter a clearing. The tent shone with whiteness: the door in the birchbark was closed by a white fox skin. The wind refused to approach it. Even the odors toed the line and washed their feet before leaving the woods to enter the shaman's shelter.

Edechewe had made peace with his wife. It was he who had been unfaithful and abused her. He didn't know how to say: "I'm not good at loving you."

He realized now that he had never seen anything. Since his healing, he no longer felt the need to tell himself stories. He had been sincere with her, but he didn't even know if there was a floor in the heart he could walk on in total truth. He believed that the heart was only a lake, a big liquid mass, and that, if he blew on the water, he could create a current, a meaning, a direction, a love by his will alone.

His wife had looked at him with such tenderness and so complete an understanding that it was no longer possible for her even to contemplate sleeping with him: it would have been a profanation. Edechewe had even succeeded in releasing his brother from the depth of guilt that had always prevented him from hunting successfully. Now Uapush was integrated into a group of hunters and brought his family meat.

After this reconciliation, they had brought to him two children with a fever. They came out of the tent laughing and playing. Another day, he had soothed a bad burn: the man had shed tears of joy. But above all he brought peace to everyone. All quarrels lost their passion and their prickles as soon as they dared to approach the white tent. Suddenly they were nothing at all: a laughable child's game. What was a tragedy as they climbed the shaman's hill was no more than a joke when they went down it.

It was good to live in Sheshatshiu, between the Uinipek and Edechewe's white uitsh.

\* \* \*

And then one day a woman was heard, climbing down a mountain and singing in an Innu language not quite the same as the village's. They didn't know her. She was covered by a loincloth of bear fur. Blood ran down her chest; she was badly wounded. The claws of a bear or a wolf had torn her. The lacerations were soiled with dirt and slobber. The hideous and alarming wound formed a kind of swelling on her skin. The woman was humming the death song. Her voice was growing weak.

Everyone gathered. The three-footed one had heard the song, the noises and the shouts. He came down from his hill. They brought him a pail of water.

He took some Tshakapesh's beard, plunged it into the bark pail and washed the wound. It disappeared like a spot of dirt in a torrent of clear water.

Everyone stepped back, afraid.

In Edechewe's hands, the woman's chest glistened, the points of the nipples sparkled, the silky spheres shone, the belly, slightly rounded beneath the navel, gleamed. She had only been pregnant a short time, and the healer's heart visibly melted in her presence.

When he understood that he had not only healed, but transformed her into something like the moon, he started to tremble. He was going to wake up from a dream... It was too extraordinary. But everything was extraordinary since Tshakapesh had chosen him.

So that he would not wake up, the woman took hold of the back of Edechewe's neck and turned his face toward her. At that precise moment, he sank into his own male flesh, a flesh he had never really inhabited. The woman he had in his arms erased all of his fog-shrouded past. He had just been born, and in this world there was just this face, these breasts, this belly, these arms, this quivering heart drawing him into a universe he didn't know.

The whale was going to dive... The village no longer existed.

He was in Shashauan's eyes, in the middle of the ocean, and the whale spouts were spraying out everywhere. He had already seen this woman in his dream. It was vague, he wasn't sure about the features, nor the body, nor the light, nor even the color of the eyes, but it was the same sea, the same whale spouts. It was immense, much grander than the blue sky or the night pierced with stars: it was absolute. For the stars can be seen, and all this and all that, you can circle them with your hand or with your eyes, it is limited, while she was all that could be but will never be, and all that, in a body.

The village managed to get out of its stupor. They went to look for some flowers. They lit a fire. They took some white caribou fat out of a hole in the rock and brought it to the fire. Everyone went out to get their most best clothing, their most beautiful finery. Girls dressed the stranger in a lovely dress of supple leather... The wedding lasted all the rest of the day, all the red part of the evening, until the stars began to weep.

He would have wanted here and now to have two legs in order to lift her to his bed. Three drops of bitterness fell on his tongue, but his wife's saliva was already dissolving them.

\* \* \*

A grandfather will never be able to describe their wedding night. Only the inside of bark knows these things.

\* \* \*

It is not very often that a woman so clearly knows that, from start to finish, she has fabricated the man and his strength, the shaman and his magic. Several months before, she had sown the strength that now was taking her in his arms. She had taken care of it like a grandfather takes care of a granddaughter, from a distance, with all the tools of mystery. She had succeeded in making out of a remnant, out of a dying man, out of a condemned man, a being so sure of himself, so serene that even the storms listened to him.

She looked at him looking at her. His eyes shone like eyes had never shone...

Suddenly, Shashauan became the greatest of mysteries: "Man", she told herself, "is not an animal like the others: the wolf cub inevitably becomes a wolf, the baby hare becomes a hare, the fawn becomes a deer, but man is just an empty hole out of which many things can be made to come - a bear, a partridge, a seal, a hunter, a coward or a shaman. He is not a piece of wood you carve with a knife; there is no wood in him. There is just an empty hole. What comes out of it depends partly on the man, for if he doesn't devote himself to action entirely, he remains empty, as empty as a badly-sewn bark pail. But if he gives himself, if he wants himself, he becomes all that they make of him."

"He is a shaman, but I, the swallow who made this half-dead man a shaman, who am I?"

She knew very well that she had done everything not by lying, but out of necessity.

There is no free place in a village: you must carve out your place, for if man is an empty hole, the village is a set of pieces of wood that have to find their role each in relation to the others. In this wood, each one carves out his place. And if you don't carve it you find yourself lower than everyone, your face in the water, your back under the tongues of the others. She didn't want that life... She was carrying a child, a child of the Far North...

So, when she saw that handsome half a man completely going to waste in the marsh, her plan had germinated. She made a husband and a shaman for herself. The one to love her, the other to guarantee her a place in the village.

But she, Shashauan, she who had made the husband and the shaman, who was she? Who had made her the mother of this man?

She was standing in front of her own inner and creative abyss, and the vertigo gave her an incurable anxiety.

\* \* \*

Three-foot had become the center of the village. They came to him for all kinds of sufferings, small and great; even his brother had come to see him to ask for a herb that would make him a better husband. Edechewe took the first herb that came to hand, for he knew that the cure came from his sureness and his sureness came from the healings he had already accomplished, and this was a circle that happened all by itself, in the laugh of Tshakapesh. It was simply a gift. He didn't derive any glory from it. He simply concerned himself with not willing anything, and letting Tshakapesh amuse himself the way he liked.

Obviously he never gave any advice, for if he had, by what miracle would the person have gone home confident of her or his faculties? He only took care to listen long enough and completely enough for the healthy part to cure the unhealthy part and thus acquire confidence. If necessary, he gave an herb or did something to join the sick person's two hanging ends. And the person went away a little more unified.

\* \* \*

What he hadn't foreseen was the widening tornado and the limitless enchantment Shashauan was exercising, unbeknownst to herself.

Edechewe was literally flowing in the maelstrom. This was taking place as if the circular movement of a whale had taken all the water's currents along with it, and through them, all the air's currents, and through them, all the fire's currents, so that all the cardinal points, the east, the north, the west, the south, had begun to turn and turn, and nothing transversal, neither a doubt, nor a constraint, nor an element, nor an animal, nor a thing, resisted in any way. So, in the acceleration of self in self by self, at the moment when every force and every thing is swallowed up in the same impulsion, being collapses on itself in the sex of a woman; the entire world turns over in her skin.

\* \* \*

There were no longer any mountains around him, nor trees, nor lake, nor village, nor friends, nor tent, nor hunting, nor whales, nor the canopy of heaven, nor stars, nor ancestors; all this disappeared in her movement. He thought only of caressing this body lending itself to him. He thought only of entering this body, of sinking into its mystery. There was in this woman's eyes something so sad, so mysterious, something that no longer believed in the magic of anything at all, that no longer willed, that no longer desired, something that simply hoped to disappear, to plunge into the sea...

Edechewe wore himself out in this new universe. He abandoned one breast only to arrive at the other, he left the eyes only to reach the sex, he abandoned the belly only to meet the back, he manipulated all this warmth, all this softness, all this scent, all this sponginess with all his powerlessness to heal himself. Moreover, he above all did not want to be healed. He wanted to be crazy with love for her, and he wanted her to be crazy with love for him.

But she wasn't crazy for him, she wasn't crazy at all: she was simply facing the abyss of her own creative powers.

Mother of a shaman. Who would have thought of it?

She gave herself to him, she yielded herself to pleasure like a drowning woman stretches out her hands to a rescuer. But there were no hands, since the sorcerer's hands were her own hands, her invention. And the more he knew what to do, the more sensation carried her away, the more she knew she was a prisoner of her own powers that she herself put in him. She was the lake under the wind, the mountain under the reddening sun, the moon under the stars, the pulp of the earth under the caribou's hooves. Her mind dissolved in the feeling of

drawing the creative act out of her own nothingness. And she didn't want other worlds. She would have simply wanted a body to be under her, in its own firmness, in its own will, like the rock of foundation that separates the fertile earth from the creative fire.

But there was no foundation: everything came directly out of the black abyss of her mind.

He had never stretched out, never lain down on the ground. He was far from being a foundation stone: he was just a fabrication, a dream that has been successfully embodied. To tell the truth, he was instead entirely lost in a country whose body he was sounding and which was in some way his origin. A woman. Woman. He was lost in a Nitassinan he was trying to discover, a land all the more fascinating and intriguing for being nothing, nothing but the sound of a swallow. But this nothing had created him completely. Powerful shaman.

Around the masculine cyclone caressing her, Shashauan saw a terrible fear forming: if he woke up one morning and the woman was no longer there...

The shaman could never approach that possibility, not even a little; he could never look hard at that fear, nor even feel it. But she was there, as solid as the shore of the lake. She was the unspoken-of container of all the water that he was and of all the crazy love he had surrendered to.

Shashauan was his container, and if she were opened, he would be unwound. And if he were unwound, she, Shashauan, would be nothing any longer. It was like holding his being in his own hands. A terrible feeling. Who can endure the feeling of having a holy lie for a container, and knowing that this container is one's self around one's self?

For the shaman, everything was nothing. Let the village disappear! It was nothing. Let his brother take a mind to jump off a cliff! It was nothing. Let his first wife and the children starve to death this winter! It was nothing. Let him, the three-foot, lose his leg, or even his sex, or even his hands, this was nothing, for he would still have a mouth, a nose, and hair to cover that silky skin he could no longer do without. And if he died, this would be nothing either, for he would take his beautiful wife with him in the mystery of death. Everything was nothing, except Shashauan, for if she left him, not even death could deliver him.

If this fear was terrible, it is because in the depths of a man, of all men, there is the certainty, unbearable but absolute, that what he holds to be all will leave him as if it were nothing. In the depths of his self, he knows that he has in his entirety come from the feminine mystery.

\* \* \*

Shashauan saw the price that had to be paid to make this shaman. The man was lost in his own origin, he could no longer rest on his own foundation. He was attached to her like a bird is to the air. If the air is emptied, the bird falls. Because of this, she was now enclosed in a prison of caresses and pleasures that would collapse as soon as she stopped believing in them.

Which was inevitable, since he, the man, came from her.

There was no foundation, nothing but the swallow's circular flight.

## Five

There was only one moon left before the first snows. That day, the Uinipek shivered.

A white fog, thick as curds, floated over a good layer of clear air. The white cover created a feeling of being crushed, and the clearness between the fog and the saline lake had something like the density of water: you would have thought you were plunged into a clear lake between sky and sea. Lungs that swallowed such pure air were cracked up to the eyes. Sound traveled so perfectly that the birds refrained from singing. The Uinipek sparkled, forced eyelids to pucker, and eyes to water.

The children were the first to come out, as if sucked in by the dazzling calm. They looked at the Uinipek. In the distance, the coast was heightened; a green carpet swayed beneath it. On the lake, the shimmering ripples of a mirage meandered vertically. The strangeness came from the transparency of the air, which shimmered like the moisture over a fire. It transported the colors perfectly. But the colors, disheveled, had shed their forms before washing up, naked, on the shore. Everything was visible, but nothing was recognizable.

The children remained standing, motionless, on the lookout for any giant, any Atshen or grimace of Tshakapesh could come out of this mirage. The women, still inside the tents, elbowed aside the entrance furs and fixed their eyes on the blue bar stretching between the fog and the lake. The men passed under their arms and went out, placing their hands on their eyebrows and looking off into the distance. Everyone was boring holes in the clearness in order to reach something they couldn't make out.

The village held its breath.

Through the lapping of the waves, a paddle was heard slicing the water. The fine sound cut the air, slapped against invisible edges and multiplied. The drops that fell from the paddle sang in the ears. The glistening kept its secret. They distinguished nothing.

Gradually a form stood out in the flashes of light. A dark and reddish point stretched above the scales of silver. The man was coming straight toward the village, his hair bristling like the pelt of a porcupine, head barely detached from the shoulders; he was using a paddle, rather than an oar.

He was coming out of a solitude that seemed infinite. Perhaps he was even coming from death. The white fog flattening the air on the lake formed his hat, an immense plateau of snow. He was moving the silence.

The canoe was very low to the water; the hunter wasn't coming emptyhanded. He was coming straight ahead, with a proud look and a sure smile.

An Inuit in a bark canoe!

"Silattuq's son", an old man of the village remarked.

And all the adults recognized the great whale hunter's features in the young man who was arriving.

"Silattuq", Edechewe softly repeated without being able to raise his lower lip.

He owed him everything. The eminent Inuit hunter had taught him the arts of using the kayak and of whale hunting. For a moment, his heart opened completely, then closed again like a jaw on a toothache. Why? He didn't know it, he didn't discern it, but a line of reasoning was wandering in the back of his mind. The canoe in which the young Inuit was floating was in all ways identical to the one Tshakapesh had left for him to return to his village, except for the engraving of a bear rather than a swallow...

He didn't leave the reasoning the chance to end, he turned around...

Shashauan was already climbing back up the hill.

\* \* \*

The canoe hadn't touched shore when a fire was lit, a drum was searching for the rhythm and dancers were breaking the ice of the silence.

Arvik received a hero's welcome.

Long ago, his family had saved the village from famine thanks to an enormous whale which the Inuits, with the help of the villagers, had succeeded in bringing ashore on the beach of the coast. Since that time, the Innu, with the people of the coastal village, organized hunts there for fin whales, narwhals and sperm whales as the opportunity arose. Neither of the two villages were afraid of famine any more.

Edechewe had returned to his uitsh. He insisted that his wife put on her leather dress and her best ceremonial ornaments. What is more, she devoted an interminable length of time to this. The shaman let her be, for he too was in no hurry to meet Arvik at the feast.

Children came to bring news and left with excuses.

Edechewe didn't interrogate Shashauan, for he didn't want answers any more than he did questions. He assembled on an otter skin the few amulets he had crafted in the marsh, some feathers of woodland birds, some rodents' teeth... He looked for quite some time at his small treasure on the otter skin. He searched around him. He took some colored pebbles at random and deposited them in the pile.

He realized that he had no other treasures except for Tshakapesh's presence. He closed his eyes for a very long time.

\* \* \*

When the couple finally came down the hill, a red bar was struggling to hold back the black cloud of a night that looked to be impenetrable and damp. Arvik had unloaded two caribou carcasses, musk-ox meat, and dried fish. All this was cooking. The fat exploded in the

embers, and every face looked like a ball of fire. The whites of their eyes shone, and their looks took the measure of each other.

Edechewe arrived and cast his poor treasure under the dancers' feet. No one noticed anything. It was like a magic powder. The sand began to absorb the banging of the drum and the stomping of feet. The songs closed over the ears. The sparks from the fire forced eyelids to stamp their feet. Each one entered the isolation of his or her own inner cries.

A greenish smoke began to erase one by one the distinctive features of the faces. The village became incomprehensible. The dance was at a standstill, the rhythm fell apart. One might have called it a muddy duck pond stirred by atshens. Crows wheeled around the fire, bursting patches of shadows. Hands were continually plunging into the two caribou bodies. Mouths were dripping with juice. All this was turning and turning in the furs of the night. The village was swallowed in the feast like the meat in the mouths. A confused disorder invaded the village. The drum and the shouting fought to emerge from it. A dull fear infiltrated everywhere. The children had all taken refuge under the same shelter. A grandfather was telling them scary stories.

Arvik knew that he had to handle the village carefully. He knew very well that Shashauan must be there, somewhere in the feast, but in what capacity? He had to be prudent, for a village sometimes remembers two or three mistakes.

The fire was getting tired. The flame flared in the dense air. Loincloths and dresses turned, hair whirled around, arms twirled. The lake moaned. The whole forest was drowning in the brown night's saliva. The white balls of eyes threw darts through the smoke.

Little by little, however, Edechewe's amulets were disappearing in the sand.

Gradually the gazes began to seek each other in the ruddy sweat of the feast. They began to recognize each other. They had eaten too much. The hero had given too much. They searched for the meaning of this emotion that had buried itself. The gazes crossed.

And suddenly, in these crossings, a lightning bolt streaked the brown air: Arvik had seen Shashauan's hand slip over Three-Foot's arm. A murmur began to be heard in the background; whispers were circulating in the dance. In the stamping of the feet, the percussion of the drum, the crackling of the fire, bits of laughs groped bits of words. The smell of fat sputtering in the embers. The chopped lights were blinding, the night's weight, crushing... No one could see the atshens troubling the feast. Shashauan had returned to her man's uitsh.

At no time was Arvik close to the shaman. The singers and turners continually surged between them. Nevertheless, if someone had put his ear on one of the large stones surrounding the fire, he would have heard the rumbling of the rock and the shaking of the earth.

A strange duel was launched.

It is easy to capture a woman and bring her into your tent, but this doesn't attach her to the man. Arvik wanted Shashauan to look at him like Sedna looked at her father's umiak, but even more intensely, so that she couldn't endure a single bit of space that didn't have his smell.

In one glance, Arvik had understood that the sorcerer came from the same Nitassinan as he, from the same cold, and that he too had put rock in his shoulders, driftwood in his arms, a stone axe in his hand, wolf teeth in his mouth, and an immense roll of patience on the back of his neck. But that was nothing. He could conquer that.

The question: did the shaman want Shashauan like he wanted her? Did he have her in his body liked he had her stowed in his flesh, like a bone in his ligaments? If that were the case, the fight would be merciless. This too, he could envisage. Death no longer had anything to do with him, but the wind attached to a mountain, the wind that rises to the summit uprooting all climbers, that was him.

No, the true question escaped him, escaped all his powers: she, Shashauan, who did she need? When she stood in the face of the world's great night, who did she want at her side? Who could soothe her? The question, the one and only question was the following: with whom would the woman choose to confront the next three or four winters? Terrible question, for the question lived and wandered in Shashauan's skin, and not in the power of either of the two men.

That night, Shashauan had turned her eyes away from Arvik and had turned them away from Edechewe also. She had retreated, taken refuge, like Sedna, in the depths of her own being. She kept her heart for herself as if she could confront the great home, the ultimate container of all souls, alone.

The two men realized simultaneously that the woman was escaping them. Shashauan, who had loved Arvik so much and loved Edechewe so much, had withdrawn into her own heart, no longer knew who to give herself to, no longer even knew if she wanted to give herself.

## Six

During the winter, some young people from the coast had come to Sheshatshiu. The result of this was the promise of two weddings, to be celebrated at the coastal village on the occasion of the annual black whale hunt.

Toward the end of the winter, a son, my great-grandson, uttered his first cry in his mother's arms. Shashauan fed him and cared for him like a part of her own flesh. She kept him on herself, far from Edechewe's eyes and fingers, out of his father Arvik's reach, like a secret.

The Inuit hunter had carved out for himself a nice place in the village. He had set up a qarmat on the shore. A breeze caressed its furs almost every day. The children played around him. Girls had come to bring him driftwood and finely tanned sealskins. He had built a kayak

in front of the children, and the bigger ones had helped him. He surely was Silattuq's son: his fishing was always productive. He knew how to sculpt ivory even better than wood. In the evening, he told the stories of his people to those who came to listen. He was like health: he entered into the blood. The girls lit small bonfires in the surrounding woods. And, on those days, not all the young men went out hunting.

Edechewe stayed on his hill. He cured the sick, closed the wounds, pacified the disputes. Everything was offered him because he asked for nothing, and he had no time for himself. He was admired, people were grateful to him. Yet he was somber, increasingly somber.

Shashauan slept with her baby a good distance away from her spouse.

No one could know any longer where Shashauan's heart was. In her memories, perhaps! Perhaps in a dream! Perhaps in the future her baby contained! She passed each day in the heart of the village tanning skins, sewing an akup or some ashtishats. Everyone could see her, no one could understand her. She never sat next to Arvik.

\* \* \*

The time for the two weddings arrived.

Three long canoes had left very early in the morning. Naturally Arvik and Edechewe were part of the group and, just as naturally, they occupied two different canoes. Their kayaks, empty and light, were pulled by the canoes. All knew the importance of the expedition.

Once they were at the village on the coast, once the weddings were celebrated, the departure for the hunt would be announced. Each of the two hunters would jump into their kayaks. The others would go in their long canoes. The former would try to beat a few of the animals back toward the latter, who would profit from the spectacle.

The two men had readied their harpoons far in advance and painstakingly sculpted their throwing sticks. Arvik had carved Sedna in the middle of a row of narwhals; Edechewe had carved the open jaw of a sea monster.

Three women were part of the expedition: two were going to their weddings, the other was accompanying her man. This couple was, in addition, the best team of beaters in the village, the fastest in any case, for they used the same kayak and paddled in a perfectly synchronized manner, in strength as much as in rhythm. Shashauan stayed in the village; he had things to do. Arvik's baby was suckling her milk and, when he sucked, a kind of swollen and distended bladder formed around the mother-child body and separated it from the rest of the world.

The Uinipek stretched out its thousand colors; its feathers trembled under the rising sun. An easterly breeze slowed the canoes. The entire village had gathered on the hill to see the boats disappear.

However, they were not looking at the canoes, but at the sea's vibration beneath the banks of fog. These banks were being transformed into a multitude of compact masses which swung their hips like giant swans. In the fog-free spots, the waves curled their backs when

the sun's rays touched their waists. Finally, the light and the wind chased the swans into the mountains. The pure air no longer had any resistance, and north winds threw water in the voyagers' faces.

A pattern predictive of an early fall. So, instinctively, they looked up to see its possible explanations in the sky.

We don't always realize it, but the sky occupies a large part of the world. And it really was true that in the sky enormous clouds, much bigger than the Unipek, were simmering in the blue hair of the heavens, but, meeting no opposition, they came apart and reformed in slightly darker masses which, in descending, made bundles of mist rise from the lake.

And all this was so grand that, when one tried to refocus one's gaze on the three canoes, they appeared extraordinarily tiny. The passengers, however, could still be clearly distinguished. The lake was covered with scales and made the boats jump. North winds had thrown themselves at the water and the teeth of the waves were chattering. The air was crystal.

The moisture had been gathered into little piles which the sun and the wind lifted onto the mountains. For that reason the air was perfectly transparent. However, for the spectators the canoes and the men and women below remained minute. This ordinary thing, the fact that space at its most transparent dwarfs beings just by the accumulation of distance, this fact occurring every moment, suddenly surprised all the assembled village. Everyone looked off in the distance: people who, even the day before, had occupied so great a place in an uits were no longer anything more than innocuous twigs that just the slightest cough of the lake could throw off balance.

What is there in space that covers so well? What is there in this volume, so empty in fact, that is able to bury a man, to swallow him up to the point that it makes him disappear? What strange emptiness: it flattens us like a gnat as soon as distance increases! We might call it a magic fabric that, by its unique thickness alone, makes everything disappear.

And then we turn the question on ourselves. We feel completely lost in an unsoundable thickness. "From down there, I too am a little fly swallowed by the invisible birds of space..."

The whole village was lost in that feeling of gradual disappearance brought about by too much distance. Shashuan's baby tensed and gripped her nipple.

The smaller the canoes became, the tinier the gnats they were themselves became. Soon, they wouldn't be seen at all any more, and they wouldn't see us either. We would occupy two different worlds. And the great separator in his magic furs would have a lot of fun making worries and anxieties swarm through hearts.

Nevertheless, the village and Shashuan stared at the three canoes vibrating in the gilded hairs of the water. The future bride had set herself on the edge of hers, to urinate away a bit of her nervousness, no doubt. And this made everyone smile. But down there, the north winds and the breezes agitating the water were perhaps not as harmless as they appeared

from the hill. The woman almost tipped over. She wanted to hold on by grabbing the bench with both hands, and it was the canoe that turned over on her with all its occupants and baggage. Little points could be seen going in and coming out between the scales of the water.

The canoes of Arvik and Edechewe made half-circles so as to rescue the passengers and the cargo. You could imagine them laughing. The packages were firmly attached to floats, so nothing serious could happen. Those who had capsized probably removed their clothes so as to swim better. Their heads could be seen coming out of the water.

They fastened oars to the two rescue canoes in order to stabilize them. They righted the canoe that had capsized, and a swimmer emptied it with a bark pail. The wind was playing in the waves and the waves were playing with the boats. A woman had already rolled into the refloated canoe. Then a man...

Suddenly a big black head popped up between the two canoes, throwing Arvik and his companions into the water.

They weren't laughing any more.

What had the separator thrown in the water that day? Was it a sperm whale who wanted to have fun? Or a starving orca? From the hill, the proportions remained vague. The animal's thrust had been so violent and so fast that no one had been able to glimpse a characteristic fin. But without a doubt the animal was big and powerful.

Edechewe remained seated in his canoe. The two rowers didn't budge either. One might have said that they were statues. They were waiting for the shaman's decision.

For a time that seemed infinitely long, he remained motionless, without making the smallest sign. Finally he indicated a direction. The rowers hesitated, then started the canoe, which went away from the castaways at full speed. It was incomprehensible. A pure act of cowardice. The swimmers waved their arms. There was nothing to be done. With no assistance, they began the maneuvers for turning the canoes and emptying them. It was nearly hopeless, for the sea was foaming.

The shaman turned his canoe to the left, then to the right, as if he were searching for a precise spot. Suddenly he moved his arms to a horizontal position to signify not to move, grabbed his knife, got up on his foot and dived.

The weather made an enormous scratch all along the limpid sky.

The hero never came back up.

From the hill, they saw the swimmers looking fixedly in front of them, at the spot where Edechewe had dived. After another long scratch, they clearly saw, very far away, the dorsal fin of an orca, who quietly dove back down, satisfied.

Shashauan let out a piercing cry.

The hunt ended there. The two rowers' canoe retraced its route. The castaways were rescued. The village was still dumbfounded. Rain began to fall.

They saw Arvik on one of the canoes. He didn't move, remained head down, unable to row. He had sunk into himself.

## Seven

On one of the small mountains overlooking the lake, they dug a hole. They lined the hole with stones. They placed in it three seal carcasses, the shaman's hunting weapons and what was left of his magician's tools. The village formed a circle around the hole. Seated in silence, still in shock, all waited; no one dared to begin the eulogy.

The sun finally tore apart the fog, but it was cold and the dampness entered every heart.

In the afternoon the sun came out, and the Uinipek was uncovered.

Edechewe's first wife related in front of the whole village how faithful and good her husband had been even when he knew that she had cheated on him. She bit her lips. Uapush, the shaman's brother, wanted to speak, but couldn't. A little girl recounted how the shaman had taught her to locate the stars. A boy told of setting his first trap with the whale hunter. Each one recalled an anecdote, a success or a misstep, a word or an action of the man who had given his life to save several others. They were engraving recollections on the bark of the village's memory.

All night long they sang a long tribute. Then silence began to fill the zones left empty. They waited for hunger to pummel their stomachs, and this happened soon enough. They expected rain to fall, and it fell. They expected the cold to set in, and it set in. Then, together, they covered the marine mammals' carcasses with stones, and the stones with earth.

This lasted for two days.

The circle of men and women formed around the mound again. Hunger, thirst, and cold wept abundantly. Laments came out of the suffering, rose in the air and fell back, making holes in the darkness. At the end, the phrases fell apart like butterflies. The sky was covered with colors.

The ancestors arrived. An ancestor tapped someone on the shoulder, took his place, and the other returned to the village. One by one, all were replaced. But Arvik had no ancestors in this place, so he remained in front of the burial mound.

Shashauan awaited a word, a sign. Her baby was greedily extracting her substance.

A boreal owl cried in the distance, so Shashauan left the place. She was going down the hill when she heard Arvik proclaim: "Edechewe, you are greater than I."

His voice withdrew into the mountain.

Shashauan mourned one more day. When she returned to the hill, Arvik had begun to love Edechewe better than himself. This submission had made him mute, even in his own mind, for the mountain kept the words he had pronounced, and didn't want other words to replace them. Neither Arvik nor the mountain could put up with words taking the place of words.

Edechewe surmounted Arvik. And all the sky felt it.

Shashauan had to take the father of her child by the hand to tear him away from his torpor. Arvik understood that she was taking him back, and that the two men would make just one in her heart. One would always surmount the other, however.

\* \* \*

Time did its work. And then one day, the son's first word planted itself in the father's heart: ataata. The cord connecting them slipped out of Shashauan's hands.

At the age of three, the child received a puppy from his father and learned to control himself as he raised it.

Each autumn, Arvik went on the coast to hunt black whales. Every year, he brought back a narwhal, a beluga, some big seals, a dolphin, but never a single whale.

Everyone appreciated Arvik, everyone greeted him, no word was ever said against him. For he lived in Edechewe's shadow.

Shashauan also respected Arvik. In her horny moments, she flung a leg on each side of his hips and took his seed like a treasure. In this way, she gave the village another boy. At three, the second child in his turn received a puppy from his father. And he too learned to obey by training the little dog to pull a sled.

\* \* \*

The sky and the earth revolved on each other several times without ever scratching.

Edechewe's first wife bore a daughter in Shashauan's arms. When the midwife took the shaking and shivering, live and sticky ball, she could not contain herself. Milk spurted from both her breasts. There was so much life in that chubby ball that one might have said it was a salmon springing out of the water. Shashauan nearly dropped her, but the baby grabbed her by the hair. A ball of pure joy. A caribou calf already fit to run in the rocky uplands.

The mother gave her to Shashauan in exchange for her older son as a sign of adoption into the village; Shashauan was now part of Sheshatshiu. The two fathers agreed not to change their relationship with their children in any way.

Shashauan called her daughter Kakuna (I love you a lot).

Kakuna was not a child, but a herd of young caribou. She ran off into the forest, giggling. She was often to be found in a circle of grass, eating grubs, or in a hole in the snow with a white fox she was feeding lemmings, or in the woods freeing a hare from its snare. She was never lost, for her clear laugh served as a rope, and her mama's eardrum as a mooring.

\* \* \*

The snow and the grass revolved on each other several more times without biting.

When she was five, Kakuna brought her mother a human canine tooth that rolled up on the shore. It was at that moment that in all the village and everywhere in the surrounding forests, Shashauan's terrible moan was heard. One might have said that all the Uinipek had cried. The mountains didn't want to echo the moaning. They wanted to keep it for themselves in the eternal rock of their silence, along with Arvik's words.

Starting on that day, a group of terns began the habit of spending several days a year on the other side of the lake, near the marsh.

That was the signal: Shashauan put her canoe in the water and went off with her daughter to harvest some herbs around the marsh. And the lake grew calm, began to whisper all the pains it had heard since the arrival of the first Innu in the land of the last trees.

"My body is a gathering of tears", the saltwater lake said. And it thought of all the men and all the women who had come to soften its water with their troubles. The tears were not mixed in its entrails, but had formed a skin, and under the skin, the intestines of the lake digested them.

\* \* \*

Close to the marsh was an old tern who, in order to link the Extreme North to the Extreme South, had gone around the earth over twenty times; it had flown over the largest oceans in the world. It knew all the winds: those that are charged with humidity and creep slowly over the sea, lifting the frigate-bird or the albatross; those that have been stretched out in the sky and emptied of all their heaviness, that are dry and gentle on the wingtips; those that come from the earth, that are full of nutritious flies; the warm and mysterious winds created in the center of the earth, that spread smells of ash; the cloudy winds; the whirling, furious winds, prisoners of themselves; the wind of the dead that makes us inhale; the wind of misfortunes that makes us exhale; the wind of the giggle that smothers itself... The tern was full of all these winds. It had them in the memory of its feathers.

But it didn't know just the winds, it carried the oceans themselves: the blues that are almost empty; the greens abounding in fish; the pounding oceans, the rolling lords; the tidal waves; the swallows of sailing-ships; the peach skins; the oily silks; the foamy furs; the jaw of undertows. It had these oceans under its tongue, all of them. And the tidal flats streaked with little fish, the shores riddled with crustaceans, the cliffs squawking with cormorants, guillemots, puffins and shearwaters, it had them in its ears.

Its beak knew how to separate the wind, the sand and the smells.

The plate below is overflowing and full of fieriness: the aromas rise and the clouds sniff them, and all who are up there draw from its odors...

All that the tern had encircled in its travels, it contained. What it had enveloped, it carried. It was loaded with the entire world.

Then it called out to Shashauan.

"You see", said the tern, "I am a little bigger now than all the earth, I envelop it from one end to the other, I know it and I contain it, it is my mind having fun with the tendon of my wing, it is like a balm I carry in my stretched-out belly, and yet I float on its back as in a takunakan. No one can know who carries who any longer, no one, not even me. This earth, do you want it?"

-- But it's yours, Shashauan answered.

-- I've been around it several times. I would like to go further, but my weight prevents me from leaving it. I hear the moon calling me, I have a taste for the new that is burning my chest. I am looking for someone I can give all I have seen and loved. Do you want the dry air of the mountains and the salt air of the seas? Do you want the wind and the storms? Do you want the desert and the ice, the peoples of the grass and the devouring peoples? Do you want the weight of the mountains and the freedom of the valleys, do you want your people?

-- It's too much.

-- You have two husbands, is that too much?

-- I love one more than the other.

-- You love them differently. But is that too much? Nothing is never enough. I tell you: the sky and the earth is still not enough. All contents want to get out of their containers, even the sky thinks of escaping sometimes. All things overflow and explode. The arms that cover a lover, the body that squeezes him, this is a desperate act."

A memory awoke in Shashauan's mind. Between her heavy breasts, Nuliaq wore an ivory amulet: a white fox, its back arched around the sun. "The earth may be just a beginning," she thought. "Afterwards, we'll see."

The sky was blue. White balls were traveling toward the east. The vault rose up like a great skirt, drew up puffs of fresh air that, in rising, caressed the thighs of the mountains.

The canoe was silent. Kakuna was sleeping on Tshiashk's old bearskin.

"Two men is not enough," Shashauan confessed.

-- So, do you want my present?" the tern asked again.

Shashauan agreed.

It was quite a present!

Shashauan felt herself being filled with seas and whales, with heat and cold, with smells of kelp and fish, with the east wind and the north wind, with forests and with ice, with rage and

with gentleness, she was full to the brim, her belly stretched as if a whole people wanted to be born through her.

"Follow me," the old tern said.

The canoe set off toward the mouth of a restless river.

"Look, Mama!" Kakuna exclaimed as she awoke.

On the beach, there was a broken skull full of sand and pebbles. One might have said it was a bowl. The canoe got stuck. Shashauan put one foot in the mud, then the other, and approached the skull. Kakuna stayed in the silence of the canoe.

Her mother fell to her knees. With her fingertips, she caressed the sand and the pebbles. All the grains were of different colors. Shashauan wrapped her hands around the skull as if it were her husband's head. And then all of a sudden she felt a characteristic little bump that Edechewe had behind his right ear.

With an open heart, Kakuna watched over her mother.

Shashauan took the skull without letting a single grain of sand fall and pressed it against her chest. She felt as great as the vault of heaven. For a grain of sand and a star are very much alike.

She wrapped the sun in its white fox robe.

The tern had disappeared, but Shashauan's ears were still full of birds. Kakuna watched her mother return with the skull on her chest.

"It's your uncle," Shashauan told her, "but it's a father, too."

She brought the skull into her uitsh and hung it over the smoke hole.

\* \* \*

When he saw the skull, Arvik cried.

Shashauan took her man in her arms.

"You're as great as Edechewe, because you carry him in your heart. As soon as you loved him, you carried him. I love both of you."

Arvik found these words so sweet that he cried again for a long time.

\* \* \*

That season, Arvik and the hunters returned from the coast pulling a black whale so fat that it floated on the Uinipek like a seal bladder swollen with air. Arvik was no longer one man, but two. He no longer loved Edechewe more than himself, but like himself.

The Inuit now received the sick and wounded in his tent and soothed them. He distributed herbs from the marsh. He didn't give advice, for he didn't speak, but he always knew where the schools of fish were, and the marine mammals.

At night sometimes, a nightmare woke him, drenching him in sweat. He saw a horrifying maw, enormous teeth, and the two white eyes of fear. Shashauan took her husband's head between her breasts.

Never had anyone seen so happy a triangle.

\* \* \*

And the day tumbled into the night, and the night sat down on the day. Light swallowed darkness, and darkness spat the light back again. Cold killed, and spring was born again. The ice rolled in the water, and the water was covered with ice again. And nothing scratched anything.

Kakuna began to dream. A bear often came to surprise her. He had an Innu's face. Sometimes the bear came out of a stump, sometimes out of a river, sometimes he surprised her looking at herself in the river. He was not uninterested in her. She was not uninterested in him. It was a game and a preparation.

And I, the owl, I stayed on my stump. I turned my head so as not to lose anything of the circle of the world.

## Eight

A summer arrived when Messenak granted the village very few fish, and the following winter the plateaus proved to be even more miserly than he had been. Sedna kept her seals and whales close to her. Famine made purple knots in the evening horizon. Hollow bellies smoked bark. Hair got up at night, wandered in the east winds, and didn't want to ever return. They had found a frozen child in the woods. They dreamed of black things.

It was decided that three large sleds would be sent to look for caribou. The winter had rolled the majority of its moons, so they couldn't wait any longer. Shashauan had taught the Innu women the art of double furred and double sewn clothing. Arvik agreed to lead the expedition. He suggested that they start out at the time when the Inuit also left their village in the Far North to try their luck on the rocky plateaus.

Arvik's and Shashauan's fifteen dogs pulled the first komatik. These two left with their two sons who were already hunters, Kakuna, who was thirteen, powerful bows, light-pointed arrows, axes, paves, furs, a little meat and dried fish. Two other families followed, just as well-equipped. And around the three komatiks they sensed that sparrowhawks of fire were dancing, and winged wolves, white foxes, the antlers of Papakassik the great caribou and all his crew of ancient hunters. It was like sails attached to rigging. Their banging was heard in the howling of the wind. They formed one and the same herd, as open as a soft and flabby south wind, but drawn by the will of a whole starving village.

The three harnesses and all of Papakassik's team ran like a blizzard, sending up snow, frightening the white plumes of the rocky plateaus. Running on the plateau, they went up the great river's fjord. They spread out like a storm on the ice, but never lost the slightest bit of their sails. All this floated like the plume of a high mountain, but kept its integrity like a school of fish.

The air entered the lungs, intoxicated the mind. Arvik went to the left, to the right, and the sleds traced wide zigzags like a fire harassed by the wind. The dogs were no longer running to catch up with Arvik's will, but to assume the rhythm of a herd searching for scents. No dog, even when free of its harness, can reach the speed of herd of caribou racing in a white desert. The team did its best, but Papakassik's assent was necessary.

After making camp three times, they had joined one of the paths which the Inuit go down for the caribou hunt. Arvik set up an inukshuk and drove two message sticks into the snow to warn any family that might come there that komatiks of famished Innu were seeking game toward the south.

The following morning, the dogs and all the crew set out, shadows to their right. The harnesses, the animals, the men and the spirits climbed high hills in order to reach, that very evening, the summit of a round mountain that the people knew as a meeting place. The snow was solid enough there for a communal igloo. The men dug two big thicknesses of blocks rather than one. The igloo could contain everyone, but above all it brought the sleepers close to the rock.

They dug still more, and deposited the furs on the rocky skullcap. Under the bone of the mountain was its marrow and in its marrow Papakassik was dreaming as he reassembled the branchings of his antlers...

Somewhere not very far away, the snow was softening. The flaired nails of hooves could scratch and free up clumps of lichen: cladonia, cladina, usnea, rock tripe and so many other flavors, tufts, spongy and tender, dense aromas loitering like shadows. In this soft carpet, noses scurried like a colony of mice, ears kept watch, rear hooves stiffened in order to bolt.

In order to placate Papakassik, the hunters smoked some herbs, and the dreamy spirit sank even lower into the moss, the sphagnum and the cotton grass. Ears began to be filled with songs. They felt the master caribou smile.

They began to tell funny stories. Papakassik hit his antlers on branches, rolled in the peat, snorted and threw out his chest, bellowed to call his females, strutted on a mound of stones... He ended up going into the river to have a good swim. He crossed the torrent as fast as a kayak, shook himself, got rid of the water, and went off to laugh further away.

Then he felt the need to give himself sexually with big spurts of blood and sperm.

\* \* \*

The dawn came out of its hood and stretched out its warm rays. Then a ceiling of ashes crushed the light, which began to pant in its own scales. Tamped down on itself, it shone as

if the sun had exploded on the taiga, which trembled in the distance on a remnant of the embers.

Shashauan slid her gaze into this flattened light. And she noticed the line of lichen and moss that extended from east to west and slowly advanced toward the north as spring widened.

They were running there... Yes! an enormous herd, spurning the dry lichen, on the lookout for fresh tufts emerging from the snow. It was an enormous population, a cloud of spots, almost entirely pregnant females running toward the northwest, on the snow-line, in order to reach a small forest of black spruce, their maternity ward.

All this was happening inside Shashauan, who had swallowed all this space in the belly of her gaze. The old tern's gift. For her it was no longer a movement, nor a change of place, nor a migration, no, this was part of a series of mutations in all of Nitassinan, it was an expression, an emotion. When a wrinkle moves on a face, we don't speak of movement, but of change of mood, of restlessness, of feeling taking shape in a renewed form. The language of a face. And there it is, this is what it was: the Nitassinan getting warmer, the thaw going up toward the north; as for the caribou, it could be said they were freckles grazing on a purplish skin. The winter was undoing the laces of its robe of snow. The Nitassinan was in the process of waking up. The herd was the warmth of a woman feeling its way to define itself on much too large a garment.

Shashauan now knew that the caribou was the joy of spring coming suddenly out of the earth. A pure joy on a grandmother's face. She was filled with it and her skull buzzed with crunching sand, with pale and bloodless scree.

It was night. She felt two gentle hands take her skull loaded with sand and bring it against a soft and silky chest. Her head, which was nothing other than the whole earth of bones and nostalgia, the skull that carried her people and all the peoples, a vast landscape; oh well! her head now resembled a sun in the skin of a white fox.

\* \* \*

Fingers slipped behind Shashauan's ears. They were looking for something. And suddenly they discovered the distinctive signs of the swallow.

The fingers quivered: "Is it really you?"

The fingers confirmed it. "On a ticipitakan, long ago, when you were an adolescent, an animal form came down to seize you and shut you up into one story in particular. A swallow had lingered in a nest. Then it was a woman, her heart tormented, able to love two men. And then she was a mother, her heart torn open, able to raise three children. And then she was a great salt lake, an inland sea, able to understand the chirping of the terns. And then she received the world, and it is now in her like her own mind. Is it really you? Have you become the grandmother who carries?"

-- "No, I am not that", Shashauan answered.

Despite that hesitation, the two gentle and sensitive hands that were there took her at last, with all her world, and questioned her about her origin, her story and her destiny.

The separator doesn't separate: it unites in order to split everything apart.

\* \* \*

When she came back to herself, Shashuan whispered in Arvik's ear the comings and goings of the female caribou harassed by the clouds of estrus, but full of happiness, pregnant with their babies.

Then those who guided the sleds sat down as high as they could on the mountain and studied the face of the Nitassinan. Arvik looked straight north for a long time, into the hollow of a valley he knew. Every wind loaded with snow opened like a flower, but yielded just an empty mist. Nostalgia for his family, nostalgia for the Far North, for Silattuq and his people.

"They won't come," said the horizon of the North.

Arvik turned toward the south and resumed the discussion.

They decided on a plan.

\* \* \*

The next day, two komatiks set off toward the northeast at high speed, Arvik and Shashuan in the lead. They had to make a wide circle so that the wind wouldn't warn the herd. At least two days of running for the dogs. Then they would beat the herd back toward the east by letting the dogs bark and set free the fury of their hunger.

The other komatik would, during the night, slowly slip behind a hill torn by a deep river with a steep bank. There was no doubt a spot there more suitable for going down and jumping in the water. The family would have three days to build a stone dam downstream. They would then backtrack and wait on the other side with every arrow the group had. The caribou would be shot in the river at the moment when they tried to climb back up the muddy walls. The wounded would go down the river, strike the dam and drown.

Papakussik accepted this plan, for he loved the Innu, their stories and their dreams. From time to time he liked to enter like the wind into the openings of a happy village. A spurt of caribou wasn't much for him: it was like a male member that penetrates a female to see the inside of himself a little better.

\* \* \*

For three days, the two sleds of the beaters ran with the energy of confidence. The men took turns pushing on the sled as fast as their legs could carry them. They slept as best they could in the komatik battered by the rocky ridges. The dogs pulled in hope as they digested their last bit of frozen seal. They had to meet the herd which, fortunately, the flies were disrupting and slowing down.

Once they were in front of the herd, they let the dogs loose. Crazy with hunger and exhaustion, they gave way to running as if they were seeking to join their own bodies. On the lichen, they rediscovered a speed that surpassed them, they no longer sank as they did in the snow, they flew above themselves, their tongues in the wind, their hair standing up, their eyes wild. All that meat running in front of them was their future body.

Several dogs collapsed from exhaustion, their faces happy, their noses in the scent of caribou.

The herd knew the terrain perfectly. In front of them, the juicy river that had to be crossed at one precise spot... They went there. Jumped in the water. Swam to the opposite shore.

Pierced by arrows, a great number of animals abandoned themselves to the torrent. The river took its running start and crushed them on the rocks. Blood ran from skulls and lungs. They rolled in the sweetness of their death throes. A tall shaking tent raised its poles under the sky's blue canvas. An enormous rack of antlers surmounted the river. Papakassik's rejoicing was heard.

They ate many livers and hearts full of blood. All the joy in the world swept through space as if the separator no longer knew how to outdistance the prey and the predators. Then all this was set aflame in the setting sun.

## Nine

The feast lasted ten days. Gut the animals, sing, eat, tell the story of Papakassik, cut the meat, dry it, give the scraps to the dogs, play the drum, scrape the skins, clean the bones, dance with Papakassik, pull out the best teeth, the best sinews, wash the intestines, work the tendons loose, sing again.

When this primary work was accomplished, they set about making bone cheese. They chose the bones very carefully. The men crushed the tuberosities of the long bones, the women sucked the marrow from the broken bones and spat it back out. Then men and women mixed the two substances in perfectly white fat. Next they rolled the mixture into an intestinal parchment that had been meticulously hammered and oiled on smooth stones.

There was enough white fat for numerous weddings. There were enough provisions for four sleds, and not just for three.

This overabundance, stacked tall in the middle of so vast a plateau, made heads turn. A dense fog had brought the four directions together in a single circle that pressed against them.

Shashauan and Arvik remained in the fog to watch over the dogs. Sated, the packs were dreaming of a wild race over the snow. All the other Innu were working on the new komatik that had to be built in order to transport the surplus.

\* \* \*

On my stump, I looked at the four roots of time.

To the south, the eagle and the bird people are turning around a big fire to call for self-respect and create respect for others. To the north, the musk-oxen are positioned in a circle, their muzzles pointed toward the outside, their little ones inside. They concentrate their forces. The east draws life from the belly of the night. The west gathers everything into its memory.

Between the north and the south, the hearts of Shashauan and Arvik remained side by side, undecided. The darkest memories wanted to return to the light.

The dogs were sleeping.

The silence revolved around them and ruminated old images in their ears. But who could disentangle them? The fog left neither colors nor forms any chance. The fog, the fog again. It prevented the departure. They heard the others building the komatik, but the Innu-Inuit couple guarded the provisions even as packs of memories attacked them from all directions without ever coming out of the fog.

Shameful recollections, with no images.

All the hunters who were working around them, women and men, son or daughter, knew, however, what was brewing in the minds of Shashauan and Arvik: a split. Kakuna alone remained cheerful and carefree, dreaming of her Innu bear looking at her.

When the fourth komatik was completed, the question was clear, though the answer was still confused, lying in wait in the four roots of time.

It was the west that worked the most. There, huddled in a cavern, the black bear reconciled the world's extremities in his stomach. Between hope and nostalgia, he was shaking the mucous membranes and the gastric juices. He wanted to liberate his air.

The fog covered everything. They waited.

\* \* \*

That day, when the four komatiks were equally loaded and the hunters were only waiting for the fog to disperse, all possibilities seemed equal: for Shashauan, to return to the South, to her native village, tell the story of the hunt and distribute the fat that was promised; for Arvik, to go back to his native village, tell the story of the hunt and distribute the expected fat; for Shashauan, to abandon everything for her husband and set off for the North, for Arvik, to abandon everything for his wife and go back to the South; or else, simply return to their adopted village. All these possibilities seemed equally heartrending. However, none of these possibilities emerged from the mist. They whirled in the fog's confusion.

So Shashauan again asked herself what space was.

We see a man leave; he disappears into the distance. But the road itself does not disappear. On the contrary, it becomes taut like a bowstring. We no longer see the man, but the road is glaringly obvious. The man is there, at the end of the road, a three day walk away, a summer of canoeing away, a winter of sledding away, or one inch from our minds.

What is space, this separator which doesn't break connections, but stretches them on its bow instead?

"I really will have to learn it someday," Shashauan said to herself, "for the Innu is a wandering caribou, an eater of space whose life consists of continually widening his or her heart. Sometimes, her heart burns for someone. Her eyes turn toward him, approach him, two inches away from his nose... And just because of this the source of fire in her grows distant, strangely it grows distant, and the fire loses its strength. Then she leaves for somewhere distant. The loved one disappears in the fog, and the heart begins to boil in its emptiness again."

The near and the far are the instruments of our broadening, each one as necessary as the other. To feel a presence, to carry it, is to experience what comes nearer when we go away and what goes away when we come near it.

Terrible is the need to tear oneself in untearable space, the irrepressible need of the Innu heart. All the seeds are separated to better cover the ground.

When the one we love disappears in the distance, the whole horizon regains its evenness. All is there, immense, in the circle of fire. The particular presence goes away, the total presence emerges.

Arvik imagined leaving his wife, returning to his father's arms and giving his mother a sled full of caribou. "Here are my sons", he heard himself saying to his parents... To afterwards live with a gutted heart. To sit down in the evening beneath an aurora that zigzags in the seaweed of the sky, with that taut bow that connects the North and the South without ever being able to break. He wanted this evil. And yet paradoxically, he couldn't even envisage it.

Shashauan imagined leaving her husband, returning to her village, rediscovering the faces sleeping in oblivion, watching them light up. "Here is my daughter", she heard herself saying. Live afterward with a sagging heart.

\* \* \*

On each sled, the enormous pile of food; all around, the impenetrable thickness of the fog... It was hypnotic. Everything disappeared in that image. The ideas, the possibilities, the branching roads, all this melted into the image, and all that remained was a vague nostalgia, a throbbing nostalgia.

And then one night the fog lifted.

To everyone's great surprise, a fresh soft snow covered all the plateau in every direction. The hunters had never hoped for such luck. The snow seemed sufficiently thick and slippery. A

little grease on the komatiks' runners would do the trick. They decided to take maximum advantage of the nighttime cold.

In the heart of the night, in the smile of the moon, they hastily harnessed the dogs. There were no longer any more than ten for each sled, but they were impatient, burning with the energy of the caribou they had eaten. In the hubbub of the preparations, no one had noticed the anchoring of Arvik's sled. The drag was still in the raised position.

The Inuits' dogs hit the trail even before the last of them was harnessed. They rushed toward the north, for the slope was downhill there. One of the sons who was down there managed to seize the bar of the sled, but all he could do was slow the team's momentum. Nevertheless, Arvik and the other son succeeded in setting off. A madness had struck the dogs. They ran straight north.

For a long time they were seen going off in the distance, disappearing in the snow they raised. The wind behind them dispersed the image of the sled in the snowy air. Further on, the dogs slowed down and the two sons pushed the sled.

Deep down in herself, Shashauan had always known that Silattuq hadn't departed without throwing his harpoon into his son's guts. He just wanted to give him all the space needed for him to become an Inuit. Now he was pulling on the rope. He was bringing his son back to him.

A harpoon line is unbreakable: it is made of caribou sinew. Silattuq was hauling in his son and pulling him hard, he was dragging him in the snow, he was tearing him away from Shashauan. Now that Arvik had given birth to himself on the plateau of his solitude, his father was calling him back. He couldn't know that he was tearing his life away from him and was bringing back only a shred: at the other end, toward the south, another harpoon was already stretching its rope.

There was a great burst of laughter, for they knew, they had known since his arrival that the day would come when the Inuit would return to his own. Everyone knew that. The line of time is simply the uncertainty of the moment from which a certainty springs.

They tore the anchoring hooks open, and two komatiks took off toward the east, leaving a wide furrow of freedom behind them.

The circle of solitude closed in on Shashauan and her daughter. It grew larger as the sleds disappeared in the clouds of snow. The silence made audible what Shashauan knew, what she had always known, that other truth.

Her sled had been loaded with a little less meat than the others, but with a little more white fat. The eleven dogs pulled this way and that among themselves; they wanted to join their comrades. But the anchoring held, and the harness didn't break.

Surrounded by the howling of the dogs, Kakuna was suffocating with worry. However, something within her, secret and very sweet, felt a loving face in the shadows, and the body of a man removing his bear skin... But this young Innu didn't yet have a place. She hadn't

seen him at Sheshatshiu, she didn't even know that a harpoon had been stuck in her heart and was drawing her toward an origin. Who knows where the seed of love comes from and where it goes? The separator is also the uniter.

The plateau was white, bare and immense. The horizon curved beneath the sky's weight. The blue flesh of the expanse was crisscrossed by pale banners. Hearts were filtered like krill. The girl turned around. She could no longer find the gray points that had just exploded on the horizon. She tried to swallow her saliva, but couldn't. The uniter was pulling, but she could only feel the separator.

The dogs were silent at last. They sniffed the wind, some smells faded away, others came: smells of earth, of spruce, of fir, of marten and porcupine.

Shashauan found the strength to tell her daughter what had just happened: the harness of fate had untangled its lines, some knots in the ropes had been undone. The salmon will go back to their source, the cardinal points will get back their due.

"As soon as they're let loose, our dogs will join the others", the teenager objected.

-- You're right, Shashauan responded, our dogs will meet them."

She pulled the anchoring drag open, and the dogs threw themselves in every direction, the traces got mixed up, and the sled did not go forward.

"Tshitutetau!" Shashauan cried with an incredible strength, to signal the departure.

And the dogs departed, straight to the south.

\* \* \*

The rocky plateau seemed infinite. Once again it was time for the ticipitakan. For Shashauan, her third platform; for Kakuna, her first initiation.

All the strings were now visible to the mother. The strings of the north, of the east, of the west and of the south, an infinite fan of strings.

All space is a radiation of connections. Whatever direction we take, we go somewhere. Nowhere is there nowhere. We always go up a thread, we always arrive in a place, we always find someone or something. We go away from something only to approach something else. We leave without an aim, forever enlarging our nostalgia. What tears on one side strengthens on the other.

We think we are lost in infinity. The cold surrounds us. We are going to die in a great hole of solitude. We tell ourselves that we are abandoned. The mountains do not move. The heavens do not open to let a helping hand pass. We think that the world is indifferent to our fate. But no! It is one more set of stretching strings. The whole blue arch pulls on its strings, and we are hoisted by the stars.

Space has at its heart a desire to connect souls to each other, even if it means tearing them away from every anchorage. Space is a net that weaves itself and never lets a single thread break.

Finally Shashauan saw all the harnesses that were pulling on her heart. Those of the south, but also those of the east; those of the west, but also those of the north. The heart is a muscle full of points, a harpoon line is fixed in each point of the horizon, there is no way out, everything must be traveled by legs and by dogs, everything must be covered by the eyes, everything must be swallowed and digested by the stomach.

The dogs ran toward the river of Great Waters.

## Ten

"Mama, this road is deadly.

-- All roads are deadly.

-- There's no hunter in our komatik.

-- I am a hunter.

-- You're only a woman!

-- You're only a child.

-- I'm afraid.

-- Me too..."

And the sled was already sliding through the taiga.

\* \* \*

Shashauan heard my grandfatherly words in her head, like a resonance, like an echo of her own mind: "How can I stand in the face of this immensity? How can I confront alone so many trees, mountains, valleys, lovers, children, rivers and rapids? How can I respond to all these strings?

"How can I accept and endure time when all of space pulls me all at once?"

\* \* \*

The komatik climbed to the top of a mountain. Shashauan anchored the sled, fed the dogs and climbed up on a rock. Kakuna followed her. The two of them scrutinized the horizon.

"That valley down there that widens out, what do you call it?" Kakuna asked.

-- It's the basin of the Mecatina River. That forest is full of moose, bear, red fox and hare.

-- And the series of lakes down there?

-- Those are the lakes Uatshahku, Kaiaitaukupitat, Katakuaahk and Katshiputakat. Rivers and brooks connect them. You can find all the beaver there you need. And it's covered with blueberries, cloudberry, dwarf raspberries, crowberries, bunchberries and serviceberries.

-- And the river of Great Waters you told me about, that isn't a river any longer, but a sea, the same sea the people of Sheshatshiu fish for whales in...

-- It's still far away. But we're getting close to the spot where a good canoe is waiting for us, at least that's what I hope. We'll repair it and go down the Mecatina and Netagamiou rivers. In one month or maybe two, we'll be on the coast."

Everywhere Kakuna pointed her finger, Shashauan gave the names of the places, the animals, the plants. The girl's solitude widened. Torrents, lakes, plateaus, streaks of snow, networks of rivers connected a whole people. All this was her true, her incredible village.

If Kakuna had had a sparrowhawk's eyes, she could have seen here and there, within wide circles of solitude, families, hunters, fishers, gatherers, watchers, eaters, sleepers, storytellers, singers, dancers. Very small points dispersed in the ocean of an immense forest, but connected in one great canvas. A people like stars scattered in the night. Beings nicely settled under the fur of the sky, bent, bound together, tight arrows, tight strings.

Vibrate the canvas, and the whole people would know, feel, perceive and recognize the extraordinary presence of its totality.

"And if I left you now?" Shashauan asked.

-- I would die.

-- When you know what I can teach you, you'll be able to be here in my place and slowly breathe the good air without having to depend on a mother or a father.

-- Impossible.

-- All of this is our home.

-- It's frightening.

-- When a leaf of a tree trembles, the Innu feels no fear. Do you understand that? When you understand that, you will be an Innu. The forest becomes the great home when you no longer fear what it contains."

\* \* \*

The snow had melted. The dogs were struggling, the mother and the daughter were pushing a komatik that was too heavy. Sometimes the dogs discovered a mossy road, and the sled glided for a while, but inevitably they find a hill to climb on the way, and rocks scraped the sled's runners and the calluses on their feet. Abandoning the smallest little package of provisions was out of the question. There was too much for them and the dogs, but not too much for the village down there on the north shore of the river of Great Waters.

Three times they had had to make camp, take the time to replace the runners and let the dogs rest. The two women had the opportunity to fish and eat fresh food, with juniper, fiddleheads and tea.

Mother and daughter took advantage of the rainy days to slide on the water, following the marshes. When the weather was too dry, they stopped, checked their provisions, and dried the furs and hides.

The daughter bonded with the mother. She became aware that knowledge did transform the forest into the Nitassinan.

The Nitassinan was the knowledge that had plunged into the territory and pulled up treasures. A branch becomes a pole; an animal is transformed into food and clothing; a tangle of branches is transformed into a camp; a thicket provides a basket of fruit; a pile of stones hides an arrowhead; a lake is fish; dung is a sign of a trail; moss on a tree is a direction...

Kakuna realized that there was an enormous reservoir in her mother, as wide as a plateau, and that without this reservoir, the forest was death. Her mother lived in the Nitassinan as if it were her house because she possessed the knowledge. And now Kakuna wanted it in her turn. She took it on her mother's hands, in her smallest movements, in her way of walking, of looking, of moving. She peeled the knowledge loose from her mother's body, detached it carefully and deposited it on her own body like a nimble garment.

From where they were, they had to climb on big hemlocks in order to see off in the distance. Kakuna climbed to the top of a tree. From there, she aimed her gaze straight south. The sea was still behind the spiked horizon of the forest.

"We need an eagle or an owl", Shashauan called out to her daughter.

\* \* \*

Notwithstanding that the forest was a big basket of riches, it had also become an obstacle. The mosquitoes paid no mind to the pennyroyal-scented bear oil that covered the two women's faces and limbs. The dogs didn't want to pull the load any longer. The komatik made very little progress in a day.

A time came when Shashauan thought of abandoning the baggage. The daughter pushed the sled with her mother as they whistled for the dogs. Lake Minipi was in front of them, magnificent, but still far away. The women lacked strength, and so did the animals.

They made a good bark uitsh. They had to let more suns and more moons pass. A good length of time. It alone can level a road: if you flatten it firmly like a purée on a good base of patience, it can transform length into width, the distant into the immediate, and the goal is there, in the house, in arm's reach. You simply decide to wait before seizing it.

We are on a journey, we want to approach a goal, but we know perfectly well that the goal is only a brief stop on a road, just a tool we grasp to further the work on the sculpture of our

minds. That will be done. In one way or another, that will be done. We will be done. But during that time, something more vast is forming: we are in the act of connecting points lost in space. The heart responds to a call. The harpoon draws near the harpooner. We are weaving the Nitassinan.

In Shashauan's case, the harpooner was her native village, the joy of the faces when they recognized Tshiashk's daughter and granddaughter, the eyes they would make when they opened the packages of meat and fat... The harpooner had fired on the load, and because of this it had become an exhausting burden. But a new harpoon would succeed the first; there was never an end to it. Perhaps a grandmother would want her child! Or a grandfather would leave for the north again, pulling her daughter by the ears! For it's not about going anywhere, but being torn from every anchorage in order to feel, like the spider, the whole of the web.

In Kakuna's case, in spite of her dream about a young Innu man, she knew nothing of what was afoot. Adolescence was at work, breasts were swelling, hips were broadening, desires were lighting a kudlik, she was preparing herself for someone and imagining in the undefined and the obscure.

\* \* \*

The sun and the moon had grabbed hold of the sky with both hands and forced it to turn with them. The morning and the evening, the reds and the blacks tore their clothes and got into a fight with no holds barred. Stories turned around the encampment and pierced the ears. Beginnings and endings tore each other's hair. Stone and torrent shouted names at each other. The mother and the daughter responded with throat songs. A hoop of spruce and mosquitoes repaired the frayed ends of all the connections.

They forgot that they were going somewhere. If the strap of a harpoon pulled, the women took out the drum and danced. In the evening, the uitsh was filled with the noises and smells of the forest. The tent was smoking spruce twigs in its cone of bark, and the women slept in its smoke.

All of a sudden, I felt an itching. Ants were torturing my legs. My feet felt the need to stamp... My old owl wings landed on the stump. A bad ache in the small of my back was forcing me to move.

I started to take a few steps around the tent.

"Who's there?" Kakuna demanded, frightened.

-- Ssh -- go back to sleep!" I retorted.

I was so surprised that she heard me that I had said no matter what.

"What's wrong with you?" Shashauan asked Kakuna.

-- Someone was walking, and he spoke to me.

-- You're dreaming, the dogs haven't even barked.

-- No, I'm not dreaming. It's a man, an old man, he spoke to me. He walked around the tent and then, he isn't moving anymore now.

-- You're dreaming, the dogs are asleep."

I no longer had any choice. I let out a hoot at the moon, which was round and clear. The dogs woke up and wagged their tails so that I would give them something to eat. I had a few lemmings under my coat. I tossed them to them.

"Grandfather!" Shashauan called out.

I lifted the fur at the entrance. The faint light that lay on the carpet of spruce was reflected on my face. Shashauan's eyes were bigger than an owl's. Kakuna looked at her mother, trying to understand.

I sat down on a packet that was there. I had to say something.

"My leg healed very well, as you see. I returned to the village. I waited for you. I finally learned from a fisherman on the coast that you were at Sheshatshiu. I told myself that you might want to return. It was the best year and the best season to go down the Mecatina. So I have come to go down the river with you. We're not far from the canoe I hung on the pine with its hull in the air. In the morning, I am going to help you push the komatik, at least, what's left of it, from what I've seen outside."

When it goes in hope's direction, a little pile of lies in one or two truths is not so serious; it can connect moments that are too far apart to be able to touch each other. I certainly had to make a bridge.

Dawn pierced the bark with little holes. It must have been hot in the tent, for Shashauan's heart was melting before my very eyes. There was tear oil spreading everywhere, even on Kakuna's dazed face. Everything was blurry.

"Good, while I'm waiting I'm going to sleep a little."

But neither one of them wanted to sleep. I think that they were afraid of waking up. So we ate a little fat and a big piece of caribou. We patched up the komatik, harnessed the dogs and started off.

It wasn't noon before the canoe was there in front of us. Its caulking had to be redone, but as for the rest, it was impeccable.

## Eleven

When you are going down a river with your granddaughter and your adopted great-granddaughter, who moreover is no longer a child, but the beginning of an eagle or a wild goose, you lift up your head, you paddle, and happiness quivers on your skin. Life, at last!

It was because she was beautiful, that Innu girl spoiled a little by the softness of her village, the strength of her Innu-Inuit brothers. Tempered in fire, even so! Because you don't rub shoulders with Arvik without receiving a little of his determination. And not every girl has lived under the sky of a shaman. Raised in the snow, however, because everyone down there is a child of the cold. The fact remains that she was above all her mother's child, the child desired, chosen, loved, wrapped in this mother's heart built between two men and four points of the compass, a heart as wide as the Nitassinan and totally embedded in its own foundation.

The first boy who saw her wouldn't be able to fish in peace any more, nor hunt, nor go very far away again. He would be sick and lost like a whale run through by a harpoon and who no longer hopes for anything than to be conquered.

The fire of independence in her eyes drew everything to her, but left everything outside her.

As for Shashauan, she had grown supple and patient from being as much at home in the high treeless plateaus as in the taiga. A great body, in truth.

She had found her man: it was the rock, it was the earth, it was the sky, it was that undiscernable Presence which had, one day, caressed her head. What at the beginning had seemed to her a great reservoir of obstacles had become her flesh and her bones, her water and her blood, her suffering and her happiness, her roots and her fertility.

Arvik had chosen his father; she had chosen the great carrier of all.

Yes, she was returning to her village, but this was not the meaning of this journey: she was no longer traveling, she was simply visiting her house, taking possession of her body, gathering her people into its breath, sliding underneath it, raising herself above it, her body that was her child in her immense belly of snow and sky.

I could no longer speak. I was too happy. I was paddling in the rear. The canoe was wide, the water was calm, the river carried us, there was nothing to do, it was bringing us back to the sea. The dogs ran on the shore, gorging themselves on hares and partridges.

A strange black and white blood circulated in the summer's green flesh, shooting down toward the sea, taking us with it. We were in the blood.

If in the morning or the afternoon they had taken the time to look the way they needed to, they would surely have seen that no shadow came out of me, either to the left, or to the right, or in front, or behind. But who would have wanted to penetrate so indisputable a fact!

\* \* \*

Shashauan was taking possession of her grandmother the earth. Muscles of stone, that shouldn't be easy! And that enormous lung open to the sky and pierced with holes for stars, that wheezes with every breath! A very old grandmother. Hairs of spruce in her nose and her ears, bears that sharpen their claws on our nerves, stars that bombard us with shooting

rocks, a big belly full of sea water, and a great blanket of windswept ice by way of a shoulder blade...

We were happy together, like two children.

\* \* \*

I got some drops of water on my face and came out of my owl's meditation.

Shashauan was paddling slowly. Kakuna was going at it with all of her young body. I let my paddle slide in the water. The folds of the water directed us better than me. The dogs were still following on the shore. They didn't see me, but sensed me, and that made them howl from time to time.

We were going down to the sea.

Have you seen the bare back of a teenage girl working in an embryonic dream of love? It is a sea of muscles. It is wide and it undulates like water. The stroke of the paddle doesn't leave the slightest eddy and yet it makes the canoe glide as fast as a fish. The shore runs with all its might. That wave on the bare back sea, these undulating muscles, this strength spreading from the spine to the shoulder, simply because she imagines a village and a young hunter, a uitsh and a beautiful fur...

\* \* \*

The shores of the river came closer to each other and squeezed the tumults between their shoulder blades. The river tossed restlessly, oppressed. There was nothing to fear since, once it was forced to enter the bottleneck, the water held the canoe well above the rocks. But the waves had fun splashing us. Shashauan started to laugh and lost her balance. Rather than upset the canoe and its precious contents, with a skillful movement of her foot she ejected herself from the boat, still laughing.

Her laugh reassured Kakuna, who couldn't turn around since she had to concentrate on her maneuvers. As for me, I only had to follow the current. It wasn't much, but it was necessary. So I couldn't, at that moment, reach out a hand to Shashauan. Moreover she didn't try to get back into the canoe: it would have been too risky. She swam, or rather swirled around in the waves, managing to emerge from time to time to take a short breath.

Her gaze had something unbelievably peaceful about it. When the wind makes a leaf tremble, the Innu does not tremble with fear. Nothing is more beautiful than a face free of all fear.

The shores of the river opened up again, the torrent swelled its lungs and grew quiet.

"Don't worry, Kakuna!" I shouted through the noise of the water. "Your mother is coming behind, I am going to help her get back in. Look straight ahead and keep your balance."

Shashauan emerged from the water, her eyes in the shape of almonds, her breathing strangely quiet... as if she were coming from a high mountain that had filled her with a

perfect purity. One might have said that the light had condensed to form a new body. She took the hand I extended to her, and with the other hand she grabbed the edge of the canoe. She rolled into the boat without making it budge in the slightest. A swallow wouldn't have done better. She was lighter than a patch of blue sky. Then I knew that she was completely free. We were both of us of the same light, and no shadow formed to stiffen us on the canoe. On the shore, a dog howled as if the moon were at its zenith.

"Your mother will be behind you always", I said to Kakuna so that she would resume the rhythm.

At that time she couldn't detect the truth of that sentence. And each of us returned to our worlds.

\* \* \*

At noon, at the hour when neither the living nor the dead cast shadows on their neighbors, the river transformed itself into a lake.

Kakuna threw out a line baited with a little of the remaining seal fat. She made a fire on the beach that a moose had just left. She roasted a fish that she ate alone. She was so concentrated, so stuck in the necessity of her dreams, that she noticed nothing. We started off again before the sun leaned toward the west.

## Twelve

That day, perched high up in an aspen, Kakuna saw the sea.

From up there, all winds went to the sea. All hair was sucked by the sea. One might have said that the clouds as they puffed out their cheeks were calling out to everyone: "To the sea!"

Through her feet, Kakuna felt the tree's roots wriggle like toes. The tree too wanted to end its days in the sea, roll in its waves and die in its arms.

The Nitassinan soaked its multiple feet in the seas. Islands and peninsulas eased their fatigue in the water.

At that time of year, the great majority of Innus had already smoked their fish on Nitassinan's rocky feet. One could still see here and there curls of smoke dreaming in the sea air. But already, many Innu had left or were preparing to leave for their hunting grounds. The weddings had been celebrated and the bachelors were hesitating, postponing their families' departure, still hoping for an encounter.

Above the indentations of the shores, seagulls were pursuing flies. Further away, gannets were diving into the immense fish soup. After that, one's gaze searched for islands, but found nothing any longer. At the end, the horizon had lost all its connections; it shimmered nonchalantly on the fringes of the bluish curtain of the firmament.

"Come down now", Shashauan asked her daughter in order to detach her from the sea.  
"We'll be on the coast before the end of the day."

A raccoon wouldn't have climbed down more skillfully. In reality, and we both knew it, her mother and me: she was coming down from her ticipitakan.

The journey had made a woman of her. She was beautiful in a way that would make all men shrink back, her shoulders were wide as a canoe, her waist was supple, her thighs were like those of a deer ready to run. Her cheeks: the turned-over skin of two drums. A nose that inspires confidence. Eyes like the caves of bears...

She was ready.

\* \* \*

As it approaches the sea, the Netagamiou resembles a long and narrow, winding lake that never ends. The water has all the time it needs. On each side, rocks slide into the river, sparkling with colors. Fish hide in the dark spots, and freeze as soon as a look touches one of their scales. The middle of the river has withdrawn into itself. The current sings around the canoe. Birds scratch the membranes of silence.

Kakuna paddled vigorously. Her mother slept in a circle of light, leaning on packages of meat and fat. I was paddling in the rear, and my owl feathers whistled in the wind.

To tell the truth, Shashauan and I had dropped out. We laughed too much. We whistled in the air. We threw little pieces of fat into the water, just to make the fish laugh. We tickled each other's toes. We rolled like dogs in the bottom of the canoe. We went walking on the stones. We got back on board. We threw water on each other. We circled on top of the cedars to watch the sea wallow in the sky. We were light, transparent, free, visible if necessary.

Kakuna didn't notice anything, she forged on straight ahead.

\* \* \*

Far ahead of us, several bends of the river away and quite close to its mouth, a bear was fishing on the sandy shore of a meander. The winter had been especially long for him: too much solitude. He hadn't slept well. He came out of it in a foul mood. He stared at the air, wondering what he wanted from it. But he was an excellent fisherman.

We never know too much about what is going on in a young bear's mind when the winter is too long. Months in the darkness, like the root of a tree! He is in the earth, a hill on his head. The skull of the earth under his rump. All that has still not found a taste for light turns around him. In the shadows, all is possible, but nothing has yet been accomplished. The bear finds himself between rocks and possibilities. He is in the world of roots. The end of the roots is lost in the formless, the dreams are blurred, the desires are vague. All this becomes clear as it goes up the veins of the tree. At the end of the branches, there are leaves, fruits, seeds, future, for the light above works hard to sculpt the shadows.

But the fishing bear had to turn back on himself.

The first summer, he had lived his childhood. In the winter, he had digested it badly. The following summer, he had done his first apprenticeships. In the winter, he had assimilated them badly.

He got up grouchy. He lay down grumpy.

After that, he had holed up in this inner cave and rehashed his old grudges. He had gone to sleep in all this darkness swollen with resentments. And, what a miracle! images of blueberries, insects, honey and salmon came out of there.

It was at that moment that, starting from his cave, he had crept into the roots and had climbed back up toward the light as he made the world, he, the creator bear, he who goes from failure to failure toward the realization of his dream.

The trees grow, like the ferns and all the plants of the world. Baby birds come out of their eggs, animals from their mothers. Spring flowers straight from the mind of the bear. Each spring, we are born from the bear, as we take the road of the birches and the spruce.

The light crashes against our dreams, and the berries glisten in the fields. The world is a dream that comes out of the bear.

\* \* \*

There, it was summer. Spring had reinvented everything. The bear had dreamed of a female. And that female had not yet come out of the earth. She must certainly be somewhere.

It's crazy, these dreams that hook onto things like spiderwebs, and these spiderwebs that capture dreams!

The river, the rocks, the trees, the berries, the fish, they were all there in front of him, under his feet, in his hands, because he had desired them and dreamed them. They were grudges that had turned out well in the end. A shadow that came out of the shadows, taking the form that the light gave it.

A bear who turned out well comes out of his cave and finds all he desires. Even more than that, he discovers that all that is there is there because he desires it. That is a bear worthy of his species.

He was on a rock, his feet were listening to the rock. He detected distant knocking sounds. He had opened his fish, cleaned them, and left them to dry on some branches. A funny kind of a bear!

\* \* \*

He had dreamed of a female. All the spring weddings had taken place, but he hadn't found anyone. However, he had certainly dreamed of a girl. He was sure of that. He was even beginning to realize that he had seen her at the prow of a canoe filled with caribou meat.

He recognized the rocks, the trees, and above all the birch to the right, formed of three dazzling trunks.

But it was impossible. A girl couldn't suddenly come out of the river like that as if she came down from the sky, her hair still full of the North and the paws of dogs.

Nevertheless, he had gotten up and thrown his line into a pool, ready to deliver his hook just in front of the mouth of a big fish that was undulating in the shade. He was handsome in the oiled sweat that slid down his trunk and his thighs. A band of bark encircled his forehead, a bear tooth hung on his chest.

He would fish until it snowed if he had to. His dream could not have deceived him. Tshakapesh couldn't have knocked in his skull like that for nothing.

### Thirteen

He was called Mashk Katshish (Brown Bear), son of Pishou, Tshiashk's best hunting friend. Mashk had lived for three winters in a cave with his mother and his sister following a misfortune...

Summer was at its last moon. His family was resigned to leaving once again for their hunting grounds beside the Mecatina. He hadn't found a woman, and it was the fourth year that he was fishing all summer on the Netagamiou.

This is what he had dreamed.

He had seen her come out of the forest: her hair carrying the smell of snow and lichen, her eyes shining like oysters in the sea, her lips streaming with a blood-red light, the water forming beads on her chest. She was like a land without trees, the horizon on her shoulders; incapable of blocking the skyline.

The disappearance of the bird clan, its ascent of the Netagamiou in the hope of capturing the spirit of the caribou, he had heard his mother tell about this, one traditional story among a hundred others. They had also revealed to him the story of an Inuit hunter of wind. But that was another story, even more vague, and above all more unbelievable. His grandmother had uttered the name of Shashauan Pelshish, but she didn't know anything else, except that she would return in the form of a perfectly white tern. They also spoke of a canoe loaded with caribou fat that would go down the Netagamiou by itself, but no one really believed it. And there were so many stories...

In Mashk's mind, the traditional stories had no connection to each other. They were like things you know. What is a thing you know? If you know how to make a canoe, this stays in your mind like a salmon hidden in a pool. One day, you need a canoe and there are birch trees nearby. Then the salmon emerges. And the knowledge goes into operation. For him,

the stories were that kind of knowledge. Sometimes, a situation would make a story that would otherwise have remained in the shadows come out of its pool.

The dream was something else. It haunted him. Mashk wanted to be captured by it.

The fact remains that, on that day, when the sun made only a very short shadow beside his right shoulder, at the moment when he was going to throw out his line, he saw the nose of a canoe come out of a meander, then the girl appear.

He got something like a punch in the chest and, by a reflex he would have wanted to suppress, he burst out laughing. He spoke to the young Innu as if he had known her since early childhood.

"But what are you doing, steering your canoe by the nose?"

No one can, it is true, steer a canoe seated all the way in front when they are alone in their boat. And even less if their baggage is considerable and firmly attached to the center.

In her surprise, she didn't understand either the question or the laugh. But, in an impulse she would have liked to suppress, she looked back and saw no one, as if her eyes had lost half of their acuity: she no longer saw the transparency of the dead.

Then she heard a clap of thunder right in the middle of her chest; the canoe capsized.

Mashk dived. He had recapitulated the dream so many times in his head that he knew perfectly what he had to do. He brought the canoe ashore on a sand bank, reached out his hand, and Kakuna grasped his wrist at the exact spot where his bracelet formed a hem of bear hairs.

That night, the two points of the horizon climbed up on the cheeks of the sky to form a smile, and in the heat of twilight a tern was seen following an owl in the beating of a drum.

**END**

*You will speak to the Swallow, from your youth!*

*For you it will be prophetic, rebellious from springtime on!*

*You have seen the Owl,*

*Its eyes round and its wings spread out'*

*At your birth.*

*He too was there, perched, since the very beginning of Time!*

*They will say you are woman,*

*Though you will have the shoulders of a male hunter,*

*And Papakassik*

*Will be proud of you.*

*Terribly...*

Natasha Kanapé Fontaine,

excerpt from *Les chants de la Terre ancienne* (The songs of the ancient Land)