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A Nomad's Progression to the Settled Life by Yuri Vaella

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1. I open a door
at my neighbor's camp
and a woman offers me
a piece of fish.
I open another
and I am offered
a piece of meat.
At a third door
a woman shares her meal
with me.

2. I open a door
at my own camp
and a woman offers me
a piece of bread.
I open another
and I am offered
a piece of a pie.
At a third door
a woman milks a cow
for me.

3. I open a door
in a neighboring village
and a woman offers me
a mug of beer.
I open another
and I am offered
a shot of vodka.
At a third door
a woman arranges
a drinking party
for my birthday.

4. I open a door
in my own village
and a woman suggests
a drink for “the morning after.”
I open another
and a woman suggests
we drink to her latest purchase.
At a third door
a woman suggests
we kill the bottle.

5. Will I ever manage
to return
to the beginning of the journey?

Commentary

Yuri Kilevich Vaella (Aivaseda) was born in the village of Varyogan in West Siberia in 1948. He is of the taiga Nenets people, who historically lived along the Pur River. During the Civil War of 1918–19, however, growing increasingly destitute, the Nenets moved south from the tundra to the Agan River in the taiga forest and adopted the culture of the Khanty “reindeer people.” Aivaseda takes his pseudonym—*Vaella*—from an ancient taiga Nenets clan.

Vaella’s first teacher was his grandmother, who introduced him to the oral tradition. As a teenager, Vaella spent a number of years in a boarding school, and then went into the army, working as a carpenter. In the 1980s, he studied creative writing at the Moscow State Literary University. He began to publish in 1988, writing poetry, short stories, and sketches in both Nenets and Russian. A reindeer owner who spends most of his time in his ancestral deer-camp grounds, Vaella is the head of the Association of Private Reindeer Owners. His stand against the oil industry invasion of his native territorial grounds has always been strident. In 1989 he organized the first picket line among Khanty hunters to protest the encroachment of the oil barons. In his native village of Varyogan he established the Museum of Traditional Culture of the Taiga People.

Vaella has written and published poems, essays, and folktales and recorded folksongs. His poetry appears in the leading Russian literary magazines. His volume of collected poems, *White Cries*, was published in Surgut in 1996, followed by three more books of prose and poetry. Some of his works have been translated into English, Hungarian, German, French, Finnish, Estonian and, recently, into some Muslim languages of Siberia.

The present poem is from his latest book in Russian, *Threads of Kinship* (*Novoagansk*, 2010), which Alexander Vaschenko and I were in the process of translating into English, before his passing this June. The method employed on this translation was typical of our long-time artistic collaboration: Vaschenko provided me with rough English versions from the Russian, and I polished them with an eye to the line lengths and an ear to the rhythm. My colleague at Ohio Northern University, Jim Walter, was also helpful in questions of detail with respect to the nuances of the Russian.