Winter 1955

The Way of Ektu

John A. Eastman
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol2/iss1/15

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Calliope by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
Ektu shuffled slowly behind his fan-spread team, aiding the fagged-out dogs occasionally by giving the creaking komatik a push. His tired gaze fell to the bundled figure seated on the moving sled, then to the south where a faint half-circle of gloomy light sat on the horizon. One had traveled long and one must camp.

He jabbed his snow knife into the white surface. Working quickly, he cut neat white rectangles, placing them one by one, tier upon tier around him. When the last blocks were placed he went around the outside, stuffing mitteden fistfuls of dry snow into the gaping cracks between the blocks.

The figure moved from the komatik and the two crawled through the narrow entrance tunnel.

"Can a wife make fire?" said Ektu. Kaolut tossed rank chunks of fat into the soapstone kudele lamp and seated herself heavily before it.

Ektu lay down on the fur covered snow bench and passed a hand through his tangled gray hair. Smokes of many fires had grimed his face and bitter famine had scraped and hollowed it. Of middle age, he was old for one of the people, the Inuit, who by their battle for survival, burn out young. And yet one was young enough to breed sons, he mused, and looked at Kaolut, big with child. Very soon one's wife would give one another son. It would be the first in a long while. But there had been others. Indeed, long after Ektu would walk out on the ice alone, men of the Inuit would speak of his sons. Miltak, Aktuk, Sauqusekk, Tusuaq, and the others. And daughters? His thin lips tightened. It was for the good of the impersonal one, the Inuit, that the little girl babies had been placed on the lonely ice to die. For there were few like Ektu, who could produce sons, men, hunters. Without hope of a mate to serve, of what use were daughters? More mouths to feed, less food for those who must eat.

Even now there was no food. The herds of caribou had vanished long ago, and for many sleeps one had eaten from his caches until they were empty. One had known the hunger pangs, and even they
were ceasing, and Ektu was glad he had started for the white man’s trading camp as soon as he had taken the last meat from the last cache. He had come over the gray jagged sea ice toward the large camp of the white man, where sights, sounds, and smells were strange, but where one might receive food for a few furs of the fox. One must have food to be able to hunt food for one’s wife and son; and if food was nowhere but at the white man’s camp, there one must go for it, though one feared the white man and did not understand his ways.

He closed his eyes and when he opened them again Kaolut was yet beside the flickering kudele.

“Why does a wife not sleep?”

“One has slept. The melting ice on the walls says one’s husband has camped long, for there is no ice in a new house as long as fire burns. Has one’s husband the brain of a fish?” She snickered and Ektu’s thin face smiled as he gave her a playful nudge.

Again on the trail the temperature fell, and the slow moving komatik, with the thin ragged dogs in front and Ektu behind, left a wake of icy mist over its trail. When the faint glow that was the sun appeared again, the wooden igloos of the white man’s camp stood ahead. One wondered where the white man found driftwood to build igloos like these. He smiled. One could wonder many things about the white man.

Leaving Kaolut to erect a caribou-skin tent, he shuffled into the low log igloo which, by the blood red flag flapping above it, he took to be the place where he could exchange his little bundle of pelts for food. He stood for a moment with his back to the door, the clamor of a strange tongue faltering him. He stared at the big pale creature who was the white man and noticed the huge hands and the odd colored hair covering his cheeks and chin. He was very busy for the room was quite crowded with the people who had furs to trade for food. Back and forth among the wide shelves he moved, and on him the black eyes of the waiting people. Ektu, while seeing men of his blood, felt strangely timid and unsure. They were of the people but yet they were different. They wore things the white man wore, strange boots that were not of the caribou skin, colored artigis or shirts under big coats that had buttons and pockets. They laughed like the white man, loud, and all of them seemed to be talking in the same curious tongue. It was puzzling why these Inuit dressed and laughed and talked like the white man. Ektu felt uneasy among them for he did not know the white man nor these Inuit who copied him. He wanted to go now and lead his dogs back North among the jagged humps
of sea ice to the white igloos of his people. But one must eat, and to relieve his anxiety, he smiled.

"Does a father know a son?"

Ektu turned. Beside him a young man was smiling. Ektu’s eyes, keen black eyes of the hunter, fell upon the fat smiling face. His coat copied the white man’s and his boots were not of the caribou skin. A tangle of black hair matted with dirt stuck to his forehead, and from wet lips a half-burned cigarette drooped. And a strange odor, not of tobacco, came from his mouth.

"Aktuk! A father is pleased!"

Ektu’s smile made deep lines into his hollow cheeks.

"A son was baptized by a white missionary and has a new name James Eelya."

The words ‘baptized’ and ‘missionary’ meant nothing to Ektu. He comprehended only that Aktuk, his son, was no longer called Aktuk. The son placed his arm across Ektu’s back and led him to the wooden counter shelf. Ektu placed his pelts on it and looked up into the profile of the white man counting out the corresponding value in flat metal discs. Aktuk seized the pelts and held them up, his deep set eyes gazing critically.

"The hunting is bad," he guessed.

Ektu nodded. "One would not have come unless one’s wife was hungry."

Aktuk smiled and the eye toward the white man went closed and opened again. "Can a father hunt with bow and harpoon and still keep a wife fat?"

A rifle leaned against the counter and Aktuk picked it up. "A father should hunt with a gun," he said and squinted through the sights. "A gun can kill a seal from far away." He snickered.

The white man had placed cans of meat and boxes of tea and pilot biscuits on the counter before Ektu. Ektu noticed that his eyes were the color of the sea when the ice cakes crash and grind together under a summer sun. For an instant those eyes held a glint of amused interest. Ektu smiled. The white man turned to Aktuk and spoke something quick and sharp in his strange tongue. Aktuk put down the rifle.

Ektu was happy. "One’s wife will eat before another sleep," he said. "A mother would also see a son again."

"A son has forgotten many things. How is an igloo built? Or a harpoon thrown? Or dogs driven? The way of the white man is not the way of a father and mother."
Ektu comprehended and the impact of the full meaning of his son’s words struck him with a sharper sting than could the tip of his own thirty foot sea hide lash bite the bristling back of a troublesome husky. But his face did not show it.

“One’s wife will bear another very soon,” he said. “Perhaps it will be another son, and perhaps he will be a great hunter.”

“Perhaps,” said Aktuk, and smiled in a strange way. “But if it is not a son . . .?”

Ektu’s face did not change. “A son can hunt, a daughter cannot. A son can pick a mate, a daughter may not be chosen. When one is not sure, it is best that one should not have a daughter—even though a daughter is born.”

An exclamation of surprise fell from Aktuk’s lips, then he smirked and shook his ragged head slowly from side to side.

“A father’s way is the old way,” he said, still smirking. “The white man has made another way. A father does not need to starve, nor a mother. The white man has plenty of food. The chiefs of the white man—” he nodded toward the dusky southern horizon—“say that each of us—the people—shall be fed by them, so much for a year. If a father is careful, he can eat and do little hunting. And if he is smart, like a son by the name of James Eelya, he can eat and do no hunting. If one helps the white man and is friendly with him one is fed more than the white chiefs command.

“A father is a fool if he does not keep a child. For cannot a father and a mother also eat from food which the white chiefs say shall go to the child? A father should think carefully. If he chooses the white man’s way, his stomach will never be empty. And he will be smart, like James Eelya.”

Ektu and Kaolut ate for the first time in many sleeps. The food was different and rather tasteless, but it was food and it filled them.

Kaolut’s pains were becoming frequent now and in the night three women came and sat beside her. Ektu lay in the opposite corner in his caribou skin sleeping bag, and knew he was to become father to another tonight. Always before he had hoped for a son. Could one hope for a daughter? He smiled at the thought, then his face grew serious. One had heard strange things today about the white man and his way. If his chiefs gave each of the people a supply of food, as Aktuk had said, one would never be hungry, nor one’s wife, nor one’s children. And it must be true, for Aktuk is fat. Yes, that would be very good.

He heard Kaolut groan and his thoughts returned to the child.
she would bear tonight. Suppose it should be a son after all. Would he become like Aktuk, change his name, forget how to hunt to live? Ektu blushed, remembering Aktuk’s bold admission. A son would never learn how to hunt if he was fed by the white man’s chiefs. And of what use is a son who cannot hunt? Of what use is Aktuk? He blushed again. One would not like to have another son who could not throw a harpoon, who could not follow the seal, the caribou, the bear, who could not bring in as much meat as one.

But perhaps the son might not live to become a great hunter. Perhaps he might starve while still young because of a bad hunting year and empty caches. Such a thing had happened before. Would it not be better to let him eat from the hand of the white man’s chiefs and live, than teach him to throw the harpoon to eat and die? Ektu frowned, then sighed. One’s wife was old, too old to have children.

Aktuk had advised him to choose the way of the white man, Generations of hunters behind him, in him, pulled from the tundra and sea ice to the old way. He sighed again and closed his eyes.

A violent wind was blowing snow through the eternal dusk, swirling in powdery blizzards from one deep drift to another. Ektu listened to the weird swishing sound and heard the wind hit the stout wood of the white man’s igloo and go whining around the sharp corners of it.

He stood in the opening of the tupik, the hood of his kulitak falling back limp on his shoulders. He had slept little. Kaolut had borne before the wind had risen, for the child was with her now. A daughter! The last child for one and a wife. He stared for a time at the moving billows of snow, and knew he would miss the old sounds, the old faces, the old ways.

There was a movement behind him.

“Ektu.”

“One hears.”

“One’s daughter sleeps long.”

Ektu turned and went to the sleeping bag. Still clutched to Kaolut’s breast, the tiny figure was still.

“One’s daughter is dead, Ektu.”

“One sees. Give it to me.” He took the little corpse in his arms as if it still breathed life. Cradling it tenderly, he kneeled and patted Kaolut. He smiled.

“It is good this way, little Kaolut. One knows now what to do.”
He rose and, carrying the dead child, went out into the wind and snow. Far from the strange camp of the white man he walked, and when he finally laid the furry bundle down on the snow he spoke to it and his eyes were closed.

“Auk shu nee, little one. One sleep is good, and a long sleep is better. A child has directed a father, a hunter even. Sleep long, little one.”

And later, when the increasing wind roared across a thousand miles of vastness to blast the camp of the white man with screaming rage, and a faint half circle of gloomy light that was the sun sat on the southern horizon, Ektu walked behind the bumping, veering komatik.

He looked down at Kaolut, bundled on the sled, and walked fast, for the dogs were headed North.

**Sursum Animol...**

Far distant in our mind’s extension
there is power of great comprehension.
In the outer reaches of man’s mind
there lies a realm in which we find
the essence of Emerson’s “over soul.”

We can only wish to hold and know
the inspirations as they come and go,
For we are in still infant stages
in which man fore-sees the distant ages.
It’s hard to grasp an abstract goal.

I hold to one pre-possessing thought
of how such ideas are sought.
The body must be dormant to the mind,
feelingless and anesthetized from which we find
the freeness of mind that the body stole.

Now in this state we derive
the wonder in which intellects thrive.
One dominant idea seems to tower—
There is a magnanimous Power.
This source... the Power, *Energy* the role.

... L. Jay Lancaster