

Five Poems · *Nance Van Winckel*

ALL HE ASKS

Nome, Alaska. 1907

1.

*The stone carver is looking away
into the dust riding everywhere
on the air around the white man.*

*And when he touches the green stone,
he cannot feel within it
what the white man has asked:*

*the sleek caribou, sharp antlers,
quick hooves. Now the stone warms
as if it has always lived
just here in the palm of a man's hand.*

2.

He leaves a pile of limp money
on the counter among the many
flat-bottomed birds, but he is unsure
if the carver has seen it.

And as he walks out into a morning
coarse with clouds, he thinks of those
birds—half risen from the water,
half redeemed by the low heavens.

3.

*"No caribou in this stone," he must
tell him. "Only a sled dog who is sad."
He watches the white man look down
into the premise of dog face, a first eye
bulging. "The stones of the caribou
are more hard to find."*

4.

For days he keeps his anger to the hills,
mumbling an old Inua curse
against the chisels of Eskimos,
saying it deep into sleep against
the wagging of tails and the strange howls
of men as lost as their mongrel dogs
out on unending plains of snow.

In one dream the stone is enormous
and the creature that emerges
does not so much rise from the stone
as the stone stands back from him
like a fog moving aside
to let the darkening mountain pass.

5.

For weeks through the window
he has watched the sled-dog's patient vigilance,
so that the spring snows have already melted
when he goes to claim what is his.

Alone, the dog waits on the counter
above the granite seals and ivory
sea birds who stay below under glass.
The carver offers him a ragged cigarette

and as he smokes he thinks it is,
after all, only a green stone he found once
far up in the blue hills. And so he takes it,
puts it in his pocket, and nods to the Eskimo.

And when he steps out into the afternoon,
it parts like water, and he is standing
in an evening thick with lavenders and mauves,
the very colors he is sure he would have chosen.