

An abstract black and white artwork featuring bold, expressive brushstrokes and sharp geometric shapes. The composition is dynamic, with dark, textured areas contrasting against lighter, more defined sections. The overall effect is one of intense energy and visual complexity.

# THE SAINT ANN'S REVIEW

## ICE FLOES

Julie Wittes Schlack

*ONCE THERE WERE two men who desired to travel round the world, that they might tell others what was the manner of it.*

"Lucy, have you brushed your hair?" Lucy's mother Gloria called from Grammy's bedroom. "Everyone will be here soon."

Lucy, her dog-eared copy of *Eskimo Folk-Tales* inches from her face, read on, not answering.

*The two men who were setting out had each newly taken a wife, and had as yet no children. They made themselves cups of musk-ox horn, each making a cup for himself from one side of the same beast's head. And they set out, each going away from the other, that they might go by different ways and meet again someday. They travelled with sledges, and chose land to stay and live upon each summer. It took them a long time to get round the world; they had children, and they grew old, and then their children also grew old, until at last the parents were so old that they could not walk, but the children led them.*

Brian tapped his sister on the forehead, hard, with his knuckles. "Lucy," he asked in a falsetto, "have you brushed your hair?" Then, back in his normal voice, which veered wildly from boy's to man's, he said, "I hope not, because you look like a zombie."

At ten years old Lucy had already figured out that the best way to shut her brother down was to simply ignore him. So she conspicuously stood, sighed, turned around, and once again folded herself into her grandmother's upholstered love seat, this time putting her head where her feet had just been. She loved lying on this fluted piece of furniture in Grammy's foyer, her shoulders and head propped against one curved arm of it, her bent legs draped over the other. The flattened U shape of the love seat reminded her of the small dory illustrated in her book about Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton—delicate-looking but sturdy and durable enough to stay afloat amid churning, viciously cold seas.

She once again started to read, but it was hard to concentrate with Brian bouncing his stupid tennis ball on the carpeted floor next to her. So she looked past him and, as she did every time she visited her grandmother, studied the small figurines in the round, elegant curio cabinet. Tiny little gentlemen in china wigs

and embroidered jackets and pantaloons bowed graciously. Next to them stood miniature baronesses and princesses and ladies with high, conical hair and carefully painted cheeks. Behind them were proud prancing horses, glazed and frozen. On the shelf below them were tiny teacups and saucers; above them cloudy mauve and pink perfume atomizers and two small, framed photos of Grammy and Lucy's grandfather Jack, who'd died at the age of fifty, before she was born. From her mother's descriptions of him, Jack sounded fun; as tall and broad as Grammy was petite, as manly as she was ladylike, as ready to laugh as Lucy's beautiful grandmother was to have a migraine.

She was just getting over one now, which is why Gloria emerged from her mother's darkened bedroom still holding a damp facecloth and hissed at Brian to "Stop that bouncing right now!" Brian sighed heavily and pocketed the ball.

"Lucy and Brian," she continued, "for the last time, please go set the table. Daddy and Auntie Betsy and Uncle Nathan and Tina will be here any second, and after tomorrow we're not going to see them for a long while, and, for once, just for once, I'd like it to be a relaxed dinner. So can you please, please just help me out a little here?"

Lucy held up her index finger. "Just one more paragraph, then I promise."

"And brush your hair."

*And at last one day, they met—and of their drinking horns there was but the handle left, so many times had they drunk water by the way, scraping the horn against the ground as they filled them.*

*"The world is great indeed," they said when they met.*

*They had been young at their starting, and now they were old men, led by their children. Truly the world is great.*

"Come on." Brian tickled Lucy's armpit and she leaped up. Rubbing their stocking feet across the carpet to create small sparks of static electricity, they slid into their grandmother's small kitchen.

"Do you think somebody could walk around the Earth?" Lucy asked her older brother as he counted out the forks. Brian's favorite subject was geography, and he could look at unlabeled maps and tell you where the countries were.

"Sure, if they lived long enough."

"How long would it take?"

Brian handed her nine forks and started on the knives. "It depends."

"On what?"

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"Just wait a minute!" Brian said, holding up one hand. "See, now you made me lose count."

"What does it depend on?"

Brian stayed silent until he had nine knives in his hand, then handed those to Lucy as well. "It depends on how fast you walk. So like if the world is 24,911—no, it's 24,901—if the world is 24,901 miles around and you walk 25 miles a day, that's 175 miles a week, which is..." Brian looked up at the ceiling, loosely holding several spoons. "...3,900 miles a year. So to walk around the world it would take—what would it take, Lucy?" Ever the teacher, Brian looked at her expectantly.

But Lucy had already stopped listening, instead imagining an Eskimo in his mukluks and sealskin jacket, bow and arrows and harpoons slung over one shoulder, traipsing from arctic tundra to the desert. Surely, he'd take off that heavy jacket, but what did real Eskimos wear under their jackets? She'd never seen a picture of that.

"Okay, I'll tell you," Brian said happily. "It would take six years. Well, actually, a little more than six years...more like six years and two months."

They moved to the dining room and laid out the rubberized mat their grandmother used to protect the gleaming cherry table, then spread the sheer white tablecloth over it. Silently, they began setting out the silverware—knife on the right, soup spoon to the right of the knife, teaspoon to the right of the soup spoon, and fork on the left—just as their grandmother had taught them.

"And how long would it take to walk to where we're going?" Lucy asked as they went back to the kitchen for Grammy's soft, beige cloth napkins and dinner plates—the ones with the blue tulips painted around the edges.

"Well, Montreal to Detroit is 520 miles, and Detroit to Ann Arbor is another sixty miles, so you tell me—how far is it?"

"Five hundred and eighty miles."

"Very good."

"So how long would it take to walk there from here?"

"Well, let's figure that out. If you walk twenty-five miles a day—"

"Would you please just tell me?!" Lucy hated it when her mind was going one way and Brian tried to make it go another.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious," Lucy answered vaguely.

"No, you're not," Brian retorted. "You're asking for a reason."



"I was just trying to imagine if Grammy could walk from here to our new apartment in Ann Arbor," she answered, feeling a little embarrassed.

"That's ridiculous, you little moron."

"You're ridiculous, you big moron," Lucy answered automatically. She gazed out the kitchen window and down the hill where, in the rapidly falling dusk, a procession of nuns walked briskly from the bus stop, through the gate, toward the massive stone convent where they lived. Lucy loved this elevated view; there was something secret and powerful about being able to see inside the convent grounds, which, at street level, were surrounded by a tall, wrought iron fence; to spy on these strange, spectacled ladies who exposed nothing to the world except their pale, pinched faces protruding from their gray habits. It was like looking down on a village where everyone had a job to do, only instead of hunting or fishing or stitching together sealskins, it was walking or teaching or praying.

Then she looked beyond the convent where the warm houselights were being turned on in Notre Dame de Grace and Cote St. Luc, the neighborhoods where her cousins and so many of her parents' friends and their kids lived, the neighborhoods where she had lived her entire life and, after tonight, no longer would. She knew this—her leaving—to be a fact, but it was just one of several facts that she'd learned in the past two months. Ann Arbor was a town in Michigan, and Michigan was a state, which was like a province, only smaller. There was a university there. Her new school was called Pattengill Elementary. Lucy could recite these facts like she could reel off the ten provincial capitals. But they didn't tell a story, and she could not imagine how her life next week could be dramatically different from her life this week.

"Are you going to help or what?" Brian abruptly yelled in her ear.

Once again, the two of them returned to the dining room and slowly circled the table, Brian laying out the dinner plates, Lucy following behind with salad plates and perfectly folded cloth napkins that she centered under each shiny fork. Bowing and straightening, bowing and straightening—setting their grandmother's table felt almost as rhythmic and solemn as rowing on a still lake.

They stood silent for a moment when they were done, unsure of what to do next. Usually when they visited, Grammy was in the kitchen cooking and had the radio on. But she was still lying in her bedroom where the TV was, their mother was in there with her, and the company hadn't come yet.

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was really exciting. Lucy couldn't understand that. "Exciting" was the Eskimo story she was reading now, "The Boy from the Bottom of the Sea who Frightened the People of the House to Death," about a boy so ugly that his own mother nearly died of fright.

"*Its eyes were jellyfish,*" she read in a dreadful singsong to her brother, "*its hair of seaweed, and the mouth was like a mussel.*"

Brian looked up, drew a circle in the air next to his ear, then tapped three times on the side of his head to show Lucy just how crazy she was.

But Lucy read on, flipping to her other favorite story about Ikardlituarssuk, who walked into the sea to find fish and seals that would feed his starving village. She imagined his seaweed-filled footprints leading to the bottom of the sea and the children and women and men and old people standing anxiously on the shore, waiting for him to bring them something to eat. In this story hunger brought the clans together; in other stories old and young would summon wizards and ghosts and even cannibals to torture and defeat one another in the fight for food or whale blubber to fuel their lamps. Lucy preferred the calmer stories, where the heroes fought nature or walruses, not each other.

The buzzer rang and both Lucy and Brian leaped up and raced to the intercom. Brian got there first and, in his best Cruella de Vil voice, got to say, "Who is it?" As the consolation prize, Lucy got to press the button that opened the lobby door two floors down.

Within minutes their three-year-old cousin Tina came charging into the apartment, followed by their mother's brother Nathan, and their aunt Betsy.

Seeing no sign of Grammy, Betsy turned to Lucy and conspiratorially whispered, "Does her Highness have the vapors?"

Lucy wasn't sure what that meant, but loved Betsy's sweet smell and playful attention. "No, she's just getting over a migraine."

Betsy rolled her eyes. "How convenient," she murmured to Nathan just as Gloria emerged from the bedroom and into the crowded foyer.

"For God's sake, she's not putting it on, Betsy," she said fiercely. "Would you show her a little compassion? It's not like we're just moving around the block."

Betsy turned back to Lucy and made a silent but dramatic show of zipping her lips.

"Should I go in there?" Nathan quietly asked his sister.

Gloria nodded tensely, then broke into a relieved smile as her husband Sonny

walked into the apartment.

"I didn't hear you buzz," she said.

"I didn't have to buzz. I've got connections," he answered jovially, then individually greeted and kissed everyone in the room.

"Did you get the trailer?" Brian asked his father.

"Yup, it's all hooked up and mostly loaded...very loaded. I think you and Lucy and Brandy are going to have to ride on the roof."

"Maybe Brandy could pull us like a dog sled," Lucy suggested, joking but wishing it could be true.

"Well, let's mush into the kitchen," Betsy said, scooping up her daughter. "I think dinner is ready to be served."

"No, I'LL TAKE CARE of it." Grammy stood in her bedroom door, wearing her silvery brocade dressing gown. She was paler than usual and her eyes looked puffy, but she looked immaculate as always. "You and Nathan and Tina and Gloria and Sonny—hello, dear," she paused to kiss her son-in-law, "—go sit and the children will help me serve."

In the kitchen Grammy turned to Lucy and Brian and opened her arms. "Let me give you a proper hello."

Brian gave his grandmother an awkward kiss on the cheek, but Lucy, already almost her grandmother's height, stepped in for a hug. As always, Grammy smelled like glycerin and vitamin E cream—like a baby but a sophisticated baby who lived in a flower bed. She took Lucy's cheeks in her manicured hands, and Lucy traced the arthritic knobs and bumps of her grandmother's fingers. Grammy bemoaned these deformities but they always looked to Lucy like the contours of an old tree.

"Ready to help me fold the blintzes?" Grammy asked. "We need to get them in the oven now so they'll be ready for dessert."

Brian and Lucy carefully laid the square sheets of dough that Grammy took out of the refrigerator on greased cookie pans. Then, in a well practiced assembly line, Lucy spooned a top-secret mix of cottage cheese and Grammy's special ingredients into the middle of each sheet, Brian added a dollop of cherries on top of the cheese mixture, then Grammy folded the dough around the treasure at its center, nipping the seams to seal them. She hummed "Summertime" as she worked, her voice a surprisingly strong operatic soprano, beautiful enough that she could have sung professionally.

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Lucy had once asked her why she didn't try to have a career as a singer.

"I wanted to," she said, "but my father was very strict, and he didn't think it was proper for a woman to be on the stage."

"That's dumb," Lucy pronounced, then realizing she might have been offensive, hurriedly added, "or at least that's how it seems to me. I mean, where did he think actresses and opera stars came from?"

"Not from his house," Grammy answered, with a rare bitterness that took Lucy aback. Grammy could get mad, especially if she wasn't feeling well, but most of the time she was as smooth as a lake at dawn. Lucy's mother sometimes talked about her parents having big, loud arguments or about her mother being "the belle of the ball" when they'd go out to fancy parties, but Lucy saw none of that. With her, Grammy was usually calm and in charge, more of a teacher than a bubbly. She didn't smell of onions and pinch Lucy's cheeks like some grandmothers did; she instructed Lucy in how to cook and clean.

Practically every time they visited, Grammy would put on an apron and yellow rubber gloves and put Brian and Lucy to work with her, mopping and dusting and polishing, belying her age with the furious vigor and muscle behind each pass. She was small and her high, rounded cheeks, blondish-silvery hair, and manicured nails made her look like one of the dainty china figurines from her curio cabinet come to life. But when she cleaned she looked as tough as the char ladies who stood at the bus stop in front of her building on Friday evenings.

Effortlessly, Grammy lifted a hot pan containing an enormous stuffed rib of veal out of the oven. She transferred it to a cutting board and carried it out to the dining room for Sonny to carve. At her insistence, he sat at the head of table, Grammy sat to his left so she could be close to the swinging kitchen door, and Gloria sat on the other side of her. Nathan sat to Sonny's right, across the table from Gloria and his mother. Lucy looked at the four of them huddled around the roast as if they'd just harpooned it, quietly conferring about the best way to slice it and keep the stuffing snug against the meat. She felt the distance that lay between her and them. They were the elders—she and Brian were not.

Betsy, sitting in the middle of the table, asked, "So what are you reading these days, big eyes?"

"*Peggy Lane Goes Summer Stock* and *Eskimo Folk-Tales*." Betsy, with her special nicknames for everyone, always made Lucy feel special, like at that moment even though she was a kid, she was the center of Betsy's attention.



"That's quite a combination," Betsy said dryly. "Did you know that the Eskimos have a hundred fifty-two different words for snow?"

"It's a hundred fifty-seven," Brian said.

Betsy smiled slightly and put her hand on her heart. "I stand corrected." Then, turning back to Lucy, she said, "And did you know that because food and clothing are so scarce, when an Eskimo woman gets too old to be useful, she voluntarily steps out onto an ice floe and just floats away?"

Lucy tried to imagine it—being old and knobby, stepping onto an ice floe like you'd step onto an elevator—and floating off into dark, icy seas, never to return.

"That's just a myth," Brian pronounced over the brief but sudden silence.

"Maybe, maybe not. I mean, I've never been to the Arctic to see with my own eyes. Have you?"

Brian glowered back at Betsy's calm, bemused smile. "You know I haven't."

"Well," she answered sweetly, "maybe someday, right, dear?" Then she busied herself with feeding Tina, who had emerged from under the table and climbed up onto her mother's lap.

Dinner progressed with conversation among the grownups about Nathan's research, about what Ann Arbor was going to be like, about Sonny's new job, and the "cute" apartment that the family was going to be living in.

Lucy tried to imagine coming home after school to open a different door, making chocolate pudding with her father in a different kitchen, reading in a bed with a new bedspread she'd never seen. Though she knew she'd been born on Girouard, for as long as she could remember, they'd lived on Kildare and come to Grammy's almost every Friday or Sunday night for dinner. And though she knew Grammy had moved—from Russia to Winnipeg to Quebec City when she married Jack and then to Montreal—Grammy had lived here in the Baycrest Apartments for Lucy's entire life. These rooms, these meals, were planted in her as centrally and solidly as the stone convent stood within its wrought iron fence.

"This will always be your home," Grammy had murmured to her weeks earlier when she'd confessed her fears about moving away, "even though you'll have a wonderful new home." But Lucy couldn't make sense of that. How could something be "always" if it was changing?

AFTER DINNER WAS FINISHED and the table cleared, after Lucy and Brian had dried and put away all of the dishes that Grammy insisted on washing herself in

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red, after Lucy and Brian had  
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scalding-hot water, Gloria and Sonny and Nathan and Grammy once again sat  
around the dining room table, this time with a ledger and a checkbook and a stack  
of papers. Betsy and Lucy went to Grammy's bedroom to put Tina to sleep.

"Why don't you read Tina one of your Eskimo stories?" Betsy suggested.

Not wanting to scare Tina, Lucy chose carefully. "*The Coming of Men, a Long,  
Long While Ago*," she began.

*Our forefathers have told us much of the coming of earth, and of men, and it was  
a long, long while ago. Those who lived long before our day, they did not know how  
to store their words in little black marks as you do; they could only tell stories. And  
they told of many things, and therefore we are not without knowledge of these things,  
which we have heard told many and many a time, since we were little children. Old  
women do not waste their words idly, and we believe what they say. Old age does not lie.*

"Never," Betsy snickered, "it just requests. Endlessly."

Lucy looked up, irritated by this interruption in the flow of the story.

*It is said that men came forth out of the earth. Little children came out of the  
earth. They came forth from among the willow bushes, all covered with willow leaves.  
And there they lay among the little bushes: lay and kicked, for they could not even  
crawl. And they got their food from the earth.*

"Do you want to get your food from the earth?" Betsy asked Tina, rubbing her  
daughter's belly. "Do you want to slurp up worms for breakfast? Worms for lunch?  
Worms for dinner?"

Tina giggled and squirmed and Lucy felt her annoyance growing.

*But then children began to be born, and men grew to be very many on the earth.  
They knew nothing of death in those days, a long, long time ago, and grew to be very  
old. At last they could not walk, but went blind, and could not lie down.*

*Neither did they know the sun, but lived in the dark. No day ever dawned. Only  
inside their houses was there ever light. They burned water in their lamps, for in  
those days water would burn.*

*But these men who did not know how to die, they grew to be too many and  
crowded the earth. And then there came a mighty flood from the sea. Many were  
drowned, and men grew fewer. We can still see marks of that great flood, on the high  
hilltops, where mussel shells may often be found.*

*And now that men had begun to be fewer, two old women began to speak thus:*

*"Better to be without day, if thus we might be without death," said the one.*

*"No, let us have both light and death," said the other.*

"That doesn't sound like any conversation I've heard between the old ladies at your grandmother's canasta parties," Betsy chirped.

"Of course not," Lucy answered crossly. This was story time—why did Betsy think she had to be the center of attention? "These are Eskimo ladies. From a very long time ago. And it's a story." Before Betsy could say another word, she drove onward.

*And when the old woman had spoken these words, it was as she had wished. Light came, and death.*

*It is said, that when the first man died, others covered up the body with stones. But the body came back again, not knowing rightly how to die. It stuck out its head from the bench, and tried to get up. But an old woman thrust it back, and said, "We have much to carry, and our sledges are small."*

"I can relate," Betsy said, then playfully slapped her own wrist.

The bedroom door opened and Nathan asked in his always calm, soft-spoken voice, "Is Tina asleep?"

"Not yet," Betsy answered.

"Okay, then let's get her ready to go."

"Can I just finish the story?" Lucy asked.

"Sorry, sweetie, but I want to get Tina into the car while she's still awake. But you'll have plenty of time to read tomorrow."

"I get carsick if I read in the car," she answered miserably. Nathan was a doctor—shouldn't he know that? "And Tina's not coming with us, so she won't get to hear the ending."

Nathan kissed her gently on the forehead. "Don't worry, sweetie. We'll come visit you and you'll come visit us, and you'll get to tell Tina the rest of the story."

He lifted his daughter off the bed and carried her out to the foyer. Betsy gave Lucy a wink, and, as she followed them out, Sonny stuck his head into the bedroom. "Okay, Luce, time for us to go home."

Which home? Lucy thought and defiantly turned back to her book. She was not leaving Grammy's bedroom until the story was done.

*For they were about to set out on a hunting journey. And so the dead one was forced to go back to the mound of stones.*

*And now, after men had got light on their earth, they were able to go on journeys, and to hunt, and no longer needed to eat of the earth.*

She closed the book, still unwilling to leave the dim warmth of her grandmother's

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bedroom. Here was land; out there were icy seas.

She listened to Nathan and her mother talking outside the half-open door.

"Don't worry," Nathan said. "We'll take care of her."

"I know you will, Nathan..."

Lucy was confused. Who were they talking about? Were her parents going to leave Brandy behind?

"You know it's not polite to whisper." Betsy's voice entered the conversation.

"I don't want Mom to hear us," Gloria answered quietly. "But I was just saying to Nate, and I'm asking you, Betsy, please take care of her. She really doesn't ask for much."

"Not much," Betsy answered.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Betsy," Nathan hissed.

"No, really, Gloria," she continued, ignoring her husband's eruption. "We'll have Friday dinner with her and take her to the dressmaker and keep her car running. We'll keep her fed, clothed, and mobile."

"Children, go now." Grammy's voice, mellifluous and strong, joined in. "It's getting late and Gloria, you've got a long, long drive tomorrow."

Lucy shuffled out of the bedroom and joined in the round of hugs and kisses as her aunt, uncle, and cousin said their farewells.

A weary silence settled over the foyer when they closed the door behind them. Then Sonny said, "Okay, kids, get dressed and gather up your books and balls. Sixty seconds till blast-off."

As Lucy and Brian obediently put on their shoes, Sonny held his mother-in-law in a long embrace and whispered something in her ear that made her break out into a brief, tinkling laugh. Gloria looked at him in appreciation, and her eyes welled up with tears.

Brian gave Grammy his usual kiss on the cheek, but this time stood patiently as she enclosed him in an embrace. Lucy hugged her grandmother more tightly, though still carefully, fearful of breaking her. Then Gloria, unable to speak, held her mother, and the two of them swayed back and forth as if rocking one another to sleep.

Lucy looked away, not wanting to see her mother cry, and didn't look back as they closed the door to Apartment 2C behind them.

But as they pulled out of the garage and onto The Boulevard, Lucy looked back up at Grammy's apartment. She could see her grandmother silhouetted in

JULIE WITTES SCHLACK

the kitchen light, looking down at them, her hand to the side of her head in what could have been a headache or could have been a wave. But she stood sturdy and unmoving and brave as their Rambler and hitched-on trailer creaked and groaned its way to the crest of the hill, then silently drifted down into the dark night.

*All quotations are from Knud Rasmussen and W. Worster's Eskimo Folk-Tales, Gyldenhall, London, 1921.*