



From the Earth

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Abstract

This short lyrical reflection traces the layered meanings carried within my Inupiaq name, Puya—‘from the earth.’ Through memories of my aana and her sister, I explore how names connect us to those who came before. The narrative moves between childhood recollections, the weight of intergenerational survival, and the sacred responsibilities of care at the end of life. In witnessing death and remembering survival, I reflect on how carrying a name is also carrying love, grief, and obligation across time. This piece asks what it means to be known by one’s ‘real name’ and how names continue to release memory, presence, and kinship into the world.

Keywords: Inupiaq, Inuit, naming traditions, family, matriculture

Resumé

Cette courte réflexion lyrique retrace les significations superposées portées



dans mon nom inupiaq, Puya — « de la terre ». En évoquant mes souvenirs de mon aana et de sa sœur, j'explore comment les noms nous relient à ceux qui nous ont précédés. Le récit oscille entre les souvenirs d'enfance, le poids de la survie intergénérationnelle et les responsabilités sacrées des soins à la fin de la vie. En étant témoin de la mort et en me souvenant de la survie, je réfléchis à la façon dont porter un nom revient aussi à porter amour, chagrin et obligation à travers le temps. Ce texte demande ce que signifie être connu par son « vrai nom » et comment les noms continuent de libérer la mémoire, la présence et la parenté dans le monde.

Mots-clés : Inupiaq, Inuit, traditions de nommage, la famille, matriculture

My Inupiaq name is Puya. I was told it means 'from the earth.' We are all from the earth though. I am named after my *aana*'s sister, who I only remember in death. Hers was the first death I attended; too young to keep still, I played on the floor under her hospital bed and wondered about the smallness of her body. Like a child, but weak and wrinkled. My mother, white, took the name I was given and inked it into my birth certificate. It's on my driver's license, my driver's license which has somehow made its way back to the tundra of home. I lost it on a walk. I like to think of it, so formal, amongst the berries. My mother didn't know that back then these names were still secret.

When we carry a name, we carry and are carried by the people that held the name before us. We love and are responsible for love, and other things. I've learned a few things about my namesake. She was joyful, quick to laughter, a little stern, good, strong. I am these things too. I know when she was a child her mother died after giving birth to a boy. Alongside her sister they tried so hard to keep him alive. Straining milk from rice, dripping the residue from spoons into his mouth. He made it a few weeks and was taken by death a few days before the rest of them were taken by the Indian agent.

You should expect rain and wind after the death of those we love. The earth spends time sweeping traces of the buried back into the earth with their body. Tender.

I have so many visceral memories with my *aana*, but as I think about relating to her as a sister I will tell of a time I acted terribly. My *aana*, owning and running a small store in our village was in town on business. I stayed with her at the hotel. Once night fell I

began to realize that my sister-cousin had a real doll. I began to cry, for sleep and a doll like the one my cousin held.

From the ingenuity that scarcity yields my *aana* crafted one expertly, with nothing but chlorinated hotel towels and rubber bands. Internally marveling at how much like a doll this white bundle was, I still cried. Eventually she walked me to a nearby store where I picked three dolls -- a white cat with a peppermint candy belly, a purple mouse peppered with sugared drops, and a pink dog decorated with jelly beans. Each held a corresponding scent. I still have the purple one today. Making sense of this now I think she blanketed me in the protection from hurt, real or perceived, that she could not have protected her sister from. I was used to lack at the time. And I don't remember another time I cried over something another child had. Making sense of this now I wonder if my namesake, younger sister, stole the chance to cry for something soft when their childhood was sharp hard edges.

My *aana* used to do manual labor on the weekends for the residential school that kept her captive. She used her earnings to buy clothing for herself and her siblings because the ones she came with were burned on arrival. She told me sometimes she would buy bubble gum for her young sister. Imagine that, at nine, sweeping, washing, digging, for the dignity of being able to place effervescent sweetness into the mouth of the one she loved and cared for. I am still intoxicated by the maturity and innocence that bubble gum represents to me. The way it, for a moment, floods every sense.

They survived this. And both lived to be Elders. Respected, in part, for surviving. Between this and a whole life came the morning I woke to knowing it was time to be with my *aana* in death. I came home to her as her eldest granddaughter, but I also knew that I came as her sister. As a sister who has already experienced death and therefore knows how to soothe the dying.

Memory gone, my *aana* was the same person she has always been. A hernia pressed on her bladder. Pain made her face and words twist. Sometimes she remembered me and other times she didn't. But once, she looked into my face and said *ooo, my pretty baby, you came to be with me*. I've always been a pretty baby to her. Even though for the last five years she's held my empty belly each time she's seen me, out of love for a pregnancy that has long since been birthed. That baby carries the name of her partner, my *taata*, who died then, and triggered the slow deterioration of my *aana*'s mind. This is just to say that when I came, I wasn't ready for her to go, and when she left, I knew it was right.

He came to me in a dream. It was so good to see him. Happy as he was. Strong as he was. Squatting and putting hot rocks into a gut bag. Making *tuttu* soup for *aana*, he told me.

So joyful in her coming. He was ropey, rangy, eager.

He never knew how to cook, my aunts said.

Maybe after all these years he finally figured it out, I said.

Where I saw him the good kind of snow shadowed the ground around him. A nearby lake held a thick slick sheet of ice. I slipped through a round opening and found I could continue to breathe in the sharp water. Bubbles streamed upward around me and an Arctic char slid past. I was warm.

As her granddaughter I was scolded by my aunt for crying. *Keep your tears. She can feel them. Do you want her to stay like this?* I took to staring at a sinister looking child crafted snowman school project hanging on the wall when I felt losing want to well over. As her granddaughter I made promises to care for the children she loved and worried over. *You don't need to worry aana, I will keep them safe.* This task is one I am a little afraid I can't uphold.

As her sister I had the strength and stamina to stay. I organized and fed those drawn by love and fear to her side. As her sister I comforted. *It's okay, she will be with me now.* As her sister I stayed in bed with her, with one hand in hers and the other in a continuance of brushing her still full hair from her papery skin. And I sang. As I sang her white silver hair grew more and more black. Her *anyaq* said she was pretty-ing up for her honey, and laughed.

When I was a kid my *aana* used to sing vibrantly, full throated, waves of sound just ricocheting off the walls of the Klondike motel. She sang in Inupiaq. It always surprised me because every other time I heard her speak the language of our people it was a whisper. I am forgetting to say she did this in her sleep. She was asleep and completely still, emanating strength and power from beneath the polyester brown bedding.

I remember her telling me when I was a child that what she remembered most from her time in residential school was the sound of crying at night. Sleep brings her to shout the words they tried to kill. And there I was a child, lapping the milk of these sounds by her bedside.

My eldest daughter carries my *aana's* name. Kivaaluk. And I have been caring for her for twelve years now. Because of the challenges she faces, I will care for her until I die. But anyways, when it came time to make sense of the hospice tackle box. Looking like a tackle box, and given to aid us in our efforts to tackle the paraphernalia of making death hurt

less, I already knew what to do. I could cut and crush pills and make judgments about the interactions and amounts within. It was always going to be my place to take care of the one who carries that name.

When she finally left us, it was a leaving and a coming to both at once. I welcomed her and said goodbye.

Tell me your name. No, your real name. This is what the children say, with repetition, with hunger. Tell me who you really are. When I was a child the names were a current under the surface. The raven sound of water bubbling beneath heavy ice. Now they are releasing, like methane from the permafrost. Whispering over the surface, matter released from sleep.

About the Author

Tia Tidwell is an Assistant Professor of Alaska Native Studies. She belongs to the Nunamiut people of Anaktuvuk Pass and is an interdisciplinary PhD candidate. Her research investigates cultural artifacts produced by settler society to understand foundational conceptions about land and belonging and the relationship between imagination and policy.