

## Kayak

*for Mary Peterson Green Acres Rest Home, Auburn, 1963*

"Show us how the boats go, Mary --"

She looks out at the brightness of uniforms,  
glass and chrome, everything too loud  
for sleep, like the sound of sun  
beating down on snow,

and her shoulders begin to move.  
Palms together and weaving, her voice  
wearing nasal tones down to a glottal stop,  
Mary launches the chant for whale:

"Umiaklik uk-uk-tuq --"

The dark hunters she knew have been sewn  
into caribou, weighted with stones  
for their last journey home to sea.  
Beside her, pale old men in bibs whine  
for their mothers.

Withered white women -- rhinestone earrings  
and knotted shawls -- cling to their jealousies:  
"My cup. My deck of cards."

She is here every day, her wheelchair  
lined up with the howlers' hands clutching  
patchwork around their knees,  
the gabblers whose mouths can't stop  
going on, random and muted as lives  
torn to mismatched rags.

She's a cedar pole grooved, recorded wake  
of Inuksuq heading north through waters leaping  
with frozen souls. In her body she carries  
the dip of oars and the laughter,  
hearts lifting, harpoons rising,  
flying like ptarmigan.

Fathoms of water, air, the ancient songs  
press against her ears, swell her throat,  
enter her hands to show us  
how the kayaks go.

*(Kyoto Journal, Mr. Cogito, A Blackberry Sun, Poets at the Kent Canterbury Faire,  
The Imperfect Gravity of Pears)*