THE CREATION OF MY COUNTRY:
ALEUTIAN AND OTHER POEMS

by
Jerah Chadwick

RECOMMENDED:
Joseph A. Dupras

Wendy Bishop

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Advisory Committee Chair

Head, Department of English

APPROVED:
Anne Shinkusu
Dean, College of Liberal Arts

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A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the University of Alaska

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

Jerah Chadwick, B.A.

Fairbanks, Alaska

May 1988
ABSTRACT

The poems in this collection record a journey into relationship—both with other humans and with the mythic/historical forces that shape our experiences of each other and the land. The poems in Section One focus on an initial encounter with the turbulent weather and history of the Aleutian Islands. Those in Section Two explore the dynamics of a relationship shaped by such an encounter. And in Section Three, the poems shift from specific locale to a consideration of personal and cultural myth. In its treatment of these issues, The Creation of My Country is, ultimately, both an acknowledgement of the violence in nature and human nature, and a celebration of the creative spirit, however fragile, which can enable us to live more fully with each other and the land.
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- Alaska Today:
- The Bellingham Review:
- Changing Men:
- Heartland:
- Northward Journal (Canada):
- Passages North:
- Permafrost:
- Poetry Now:
- Spectrum (reprints):

"Eagle Country"
"Double Exposure"
"Selchie"
"Winter Country"
"A Sense of Direction"
"Storm Watch"
"Surfacing"
"Morels"
"From the Museum"
"Stove"
"Morels"
"The Goat Keeper's Lover"
"Groundlight"
"The Cradle of Storms"
"Letter"
"At Puente Viesgo"
Spectrum (continued):

"Surfacing"
"After the Aleut"

The Salmon (Ireland):

"Storm Watch"
"Surfacing"
"The Cradle of Storms"

Anthologies:

The Anthology of Magazine Verse:

"Stove"

27 Alaskan Writers (forthcoming):

"Surfacing"
"Attu, 1943"
"Winter Country"
"At Puente Viesgo"
"After the Aleut"
"A Sense of Direction"

Special thanks to the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, for a Graduate Resource Fellowship which enabled me to write and revise many of these poems, and to Joe Enzweiler, for the gift of his house in which this thesis was written.
DEDICATION

In memory of Theodore "Chip" O'Leary (1960), whose body was recovered off Kodiak Island on March 19, 1988.
A language is not words only.
It is the stories that are told in it,
the stories that are never told.

Margaret Atwood
BETWEEN STORMS

--Unalaska, Aleutian Islands

1) Between Storms

Lichen scaling rock and weathered wood,
young gulls at the tideline
where the sea grates
the shore to gravel, shreds of mist
on the headland—all shades of grey,
the incantatory local color.

For months I've watched
this beach, the storms
thinning and draining from the horizon
or spreading overhead,
mirrored in surf. And the wind,
relayed by whitecaps, grasses,
as if its violence required
witness, words like the cries of gulls
that flock the updrafts.

Now breezes drive
the water's sheen from slate
to steel. Arguing the tideline,
gulls flap and settle
like the breakers beyond them
trying their wings on the headland rocks.
2) Intertidal

Each day I went out, drawn
to the same metal sheen,
and walked for hours, light flailing
and careening with the gulls
to the steady
crack of gravel, the sea

ing its siege. Who can know
in the end the marine
life of the mind
except as it is stricken,
already drifting in the trough
and swell?

Each day
I combed the detritus. Singing
whatever I could remember, I followed
the tideline out, practicing
calm. And always the same

abject profusion: shell
and fallow surface, leaching
pods of urchins gulls flocked
and flew from, cheering
and complaining around the kelp
choked pools.
3) Surfacing

Breezes cast their nets, gathering up light in scales from the water. Cormorants plunge, gulls and ravens worry clumps of urchins. Following the tidal flat I skirt veiled pools. Everywhere kelp's iron stink, the birds' gauging scatter. Where the shelf drops into the bay, mussels bloom from the boulders. I crouch and collect wedged petals of blue-tinged black and purple, twisting the largest free. Then the heave and splash the jet fin beside me. An orca leaps again, dives and breaks, circling around me toward the black sail of a bull's dorsal cresting among cows.

Groping rock lip, moss
slick gravel, gathering
the mussels back. My fingers
numbed in the risen shallows,
I watch them sound, entering
the bright shadow of their wakes—
a hunting pod turning from mistaken prey.
The seal in me no longer basking.
THE CRADLE OF STORMS

Water like fractured slate,
whitecaps beyond the headland
meaning wind, the usual flotage
coming in with the tide: bilge oil
plastics, the dead-loss
of crab boats. What surfaces

is wreckage, waste
that litters the tideline,
the whole beach
a hieroglyph of upheaval,
its character
random as dreams.
May 12

Wind again, and the sea's artillery, a new storm sealing the open water, the horizon coming in with the surf. Let lookouts listen for the bombers' drone. Once underground, war or weather, I no longer can tell between the blasts. Cabinets rattle, pilings creak and shift. Frostbite, pneumonia, falling—men come to me the same, and I attend them, shell-shocked victims of wind, divine or otherwise. There can be no greater calling.
Ordered to translate a map sketch presumed to have been dropped by an enemy officer in Massacre Bay...

All afternoon I compare sketches, theirs and ours--here, a deep channel instead of lava stacks, a beachhead scrawled in place of cliffs. And here inlets conflict with rockwalls. How can I tell highground or mist from paper only? Shelling continues into the night. Lieutenant Ujiie relieves me to tend the wounded from Massacre Bay/Shiba-Dai, Holtz Bay/Umanese--which names? Whose map can withstand the costs of its inventions? The ground shakes. I scrape my hand along the tunnel wall, steady myself as the ceiling creaks and heaves a few shovel-fulls of dirt.
Today a gift: sea lettuce--
one of the group strafed while gathering it
still able to crawl up the beach, frost-bitten
before we could bring him in. The other men
taken by surf. At first I could not accept

the cost. A few handfuls of kelp
bloodcaked and frozen in his coat. I had to cut
through them and the cloth. He must have known
he'd never taste it when he offered. Months without

fresh food, so I relented. After he was carried out,
we picked and peeled the kelp from the rags.
The same water to boil as wash it,
I ate mine raw, an infirmary taste of iodine
stirred into my rice. It was delicious.
May 18

Medical men Reyki and Mirose wounded during the skirmish. And Hayasake, I could not help him—blood, still running from the shrapnel in his chest, churned into the mud as we staggered and fell. Wind scouring the smoke, its sulphur and sickly burnt metal smell. I sat there, held my hands over the blood steam of his body, cold steeping my clothes, my fingers stiffening. Beyond me the mountain shouldering its storm, random muzzle flashes along its flanks, and beyond them, above the furthest ridges, the steady firing of stars.
*  

May 19

Light climbs the walls
as the lanterns sway, falling dirt
staunching their glow. I ride out
the aftershocks, stumbling
among the cots and pallets—men already dressed
as shadows of themselves, and those
still wearing the gritty trickle
of their sweat, who meet my eyes
with effort. I am captain to these
lurching timbers, and crew. The only surgeon.
In this festering light, I lose
count of the bodies, the seconds
between each tremor. Dwindling
morphine and the faces blurring into one
I wipe over and over until I can
only hold my face in my hands.
FROM THE MUSEUM

In the old photograph
women shoulder their bundles
of grass gleaned from the hillsides
where it grows less coarse,
less exposed to salt winds
from the sea. Later they will
cure and split that grass
to trade for lumber, for tools
to build the last church
on Attu. But for now they stand
a little stooped and smiling,
nameless as the makers
of these baskets lining
the museum shelf—Attu baskets
meant to be used for fish,
berries, the bounty
of an island left
abandoned. Some so tightly woven
you can’t count the stitches
are fine as the cloth
those women would have
embroidered for the altar—
in gold and greens
perhaps, like the hills
around their village before
their village was erased by bombs.
DOUBLE EXPOSURE

Near Dutch Harbor, I pass
rain-blackened barracks sagging
on their foundations. Beyond them
pillboxes and beach, hills across the bay
strung with bunkers, the trails
worn into subsoil--It is 1942
and rumors shape in the static
of the radio. Fifty thousand soldiers
cramp the town, tents pitched against
winter winds. I try to imagine
them huddled in snow, the sirens,
bombs, a neighbor digging from the hole of his house,
to imagine safety, something more
than he can.

These are the Aleutians, I tell myself,
picturing Amchitka cored with slag
after test blasts, the nuclear
arsenal at Adak, Shemya's bombers flying constant
Maginot lines, and Unalaska, its abandoned
pillboxes and bunkers, these acres
of wind-stripped quonsets. I walk among
relics of a war that singed only the borders of America.
ACCULTURATION

--The Elbow Room, Unalaska

Aleut pronouns having no
gender, I hear
Irene telling her
teenage daughter
in English: “Understand,
he’s a man.”
LEGACY

"A woman behind each tree,"
the soldiers joked
of feeling horny
at the sight of spruce
they planted around their huts
to relieve the loneliness, a longing
interminable as the landscape.

Forty years later
a single stunted tree stands
out from concealment,
from a ravine picked with care
up the hillside. The banks
between it and the collapsed buildings
are windbreaks, the camouflaging grasses
flattened by drifting snow.

Beyond the boundaries
of this camp, the historical
fact of courts-martial, I imagine
a man set apart by desire,
some chastened Whitman,
his only poem furtive--this forearm and fist of a tree.
II.

Whether the wilderness is real or not depends on who lives there.

Margaret Atwood
A SENSE OF DIRECTION

Crust gives way to powder,
to waist-high drift
as we trek homeward--
hillsides magnified
with headwind, the strain
of supplies in our packs. Climbing

out of our tracks to pull you
from the deeper snow,
I press ahead, falling
behind again to follow
through the glazed depths,
the sinking grate and jar
as we lift our feet
and step on through the thinning

air of exhaustion. For
what must be miles,
both of us staggering
forward and back,
overtaken by the numbing
expanse, the provisions
and heavier boots
of our own pasts,
we plunge and falter,
breaking trail, each
leading and led.
Stay-chains ringing over snow packed
and spattered with blood, a fox
panicked as we approached, a silver
fore and hind leg caught in traps
sawing deeper for all its thrashing—
I still wrestle it beneath my coat

as I wrestled the fox then, wanting you
to force the traps and free it.
Yellow eyes flashing, jaws gnashing pink froth
from the frozen metal, the fox cowered
as I pulled my parka back, red

spreading in the snow. And you
weighing a stick, your eyes
set as you struck--blood from the fox's nose
foaming into the frenzied
whine of its breath. Eagles flew

up from their rocks to the circling ravens.
I closed my coat's sharp musk and blood
metal smell to the cold. The fox left
for the birds or trapper, you dusting shredded down
from my shoulder and sleeve, we went on through snow flurries, the dusk-lit drifts.
We resist each other with words, or wordlessly
avert our eyes when tenderness
is too much to bear our wanting
heart to be only muscle—as if
this were a question of strength,
the answer of your eyes, and language
one wing flying into itself, some bird we drive up
that feigns to draw us away from its nest.

Better the argument of axe and wood,
the rush of the stove, your face
barbarous in firelight—always
the same stranger struggling from
your clothes, your eyes no longer
fists but hands. So many nights of gauge
and grapple, our mutual hesitance to go
beyond our bodies. Outside the wind
bearing what it can't contain: erasure,
the rain shifting to snow. Better the white

at the windows, the space we enter
between words, this winter
country we’ve come to, settling for the closeness we can.
STOVE

It exists to consume:
some black grub grown enormous,
eating until it becomes
a potbellied husk, smoke
swarming above us
as we hurry for fuel.

With thick gloves
we stoke the coals,
the harnessed heat
our honey. Nothing is sweeter
than to stand close
opening our coats, to sit
keeping our distance
as it hisses and steams,
turning our dough
to bread, our touch
to blisters in the bargain.

Like a baby
it must be fed
and fed. We doze and wake,
filmed with sweat, toss it
paper, planks, afraid
to find it cold. It is
our changeling, our burden,
our little bit of hell at the heart
of our household.
THE GOAT KEEPER'S LOVER

Presence matters. When you're away
I lead the goats
to high ground, nap on sphagnum
while they browse sedge
and scrub blueberry. Each time
you return after days
a part of me still
watches from the hills. I know
goats turn feral in rut
or for want of
leading, the difference
between a tether
and our tenuous bond,
that you must go
unchallenged. For now
the billy only rubs
his horns against you,
the nanny flinches
at your cold morning hands--
trust for me is the same:
proximity, as hesitant at first
then reassuring as the extended
contract of your touch.
MORELS

Spreading my sight
to scan the tundra,
I stumble, trying
to notice nothing
but the barest
bulb shapes,
rarest fruit
of decay, from spores
brought north
with wartime lumber,
they distill overnight,
the leached brown
of leaf rot ripening
in brief periods of sun.
Green laces the mosses,
the bleached grass
sodden and thinned--
tendrils and shoots
reclaiming soil
rutted over
forty years ago.
Finding morels
among them only
when I forget
to focus, wizened hosts
of the resilient world,
I mouth and taste
one's wild leavening, savor
its slow dissolve.
EAGLE COUNTRY

Eagles at the beach
this morning. Two
mottled like the winter hills
brown as grass
flecked with rock
and stunted willow.
The others lava dark
crowned with snow.
Five birds feeding
from some
long beached whale
in first light.

Startled
as I neared them,
hills and mountains
in the rising sun
took flight.
AFTER THE ALEUT

Say a woman once stepped
from volcano steam, or a man
from the sea, desiring
to live among us. Or that
the storms once settled

leave drift logs or whale
for kin to apportion--even
volatile forces nurturing,
who would claim they are not related?

Tanaan Ahwa, Aleut storytellers
began: This is a creation
of my country. Though each tale was
their own twining of familiar
and strange, and at each telling

the lit faces, the lamps
drinking from their own
darkness, the everyday
and ancient rewoven.
Listen, even now wind

tries the door, cold presses
its face to the glass--only the delicate
lacing of breath between us.
Say the wind envies and would remain,
that cold, too, steals

around our stove for this reason. Wood enough
for the night and more
beached and curing in the blasts. Imagine

the cabinet's rattling, this throbbing
of the floor as dancing.
III.

...the world
is a wedding for which,

as we are constantly
finding, the ceremony
has not yet been found.

Philip Booth
So we go down, step
by step through the stalled
drip of crystals and calcium seep,
our guide's light nodding
among inverted spires
blooming along the makeshift stairs,
to the chamber once lit
by marrow's smokeless burn,
the vault where the beasts,
flickering from shadow
into shape, run together
and I strain to decipher
the guide's local Spanish
as his light sweeps: horse,
bison, deer that were
more than body, singled out
and painted. Their pigments,
powdered and blown
through hollow bones, fading--
in places only pits and cracks
of the rock retain color. Now holding
the lantern to his raised arm, the guide
points at the ceiling's lowest slab,
fits the shadow of his hand
over the blurred ochre
outline of another's. And higher,

spread palmed and straining, the same
irregular tracings, their color bled
and dissolving into the rock
and air, into the difficult
brevity of the guide's speech, the light
displaced by his hand.
AT THE CLEARING'S EDGE

Wind carries the bite
of woodsmoke through the spruce
and birches, the slack
tethers of their trunks
rooted in permafrost-heave, the settling
cold. No sound but the random
gusts of their creaking, the styrene
 crunch and squeak of my boots
over snow. I keep going. Dusk light
pooling blue in the tracks ahead, blue
as the oxidized hide of the bison
found by miners--the same beast seen
on Spanish cave walls--this one
equally extinct and local,
emerging from ground frozen
longer than human presence here.
THE OKVIK MADONNA

One of many figurines from the oldest known Bering Sea culture...

Talisman or child's doll,
this old ivory mother, marbled
in the midden, holding a baby
against her shrunken belly?

A charm
perhaps, her torso etched in
skeletal patterns, the x-ray
style a reminder passed
from hand to hand

to what story? The way
the starving consume their tales
for a time to keep
panic at bay in the house?

Whatever purpose, what clothing
she might have worn
is lost to us. Risen
from the slow
currents of earth, wearing
only the scarred browns
of her body, she bears
her child, that hunger
made flesh.
SELCHIE

Perhaps he has surprised the red-headed woman
wandering the beach, or she him
resting among the rocks—the stranger
emerging from shed skins. His hair black,

face less flat without its halo
of hide, his dark eyes
gentle or not. What happens
next, anyone's guess: attempted flight

or conversation. And their grappling,
gentle or not. She remembers the ocean
smells of him, his squat legs stepping
back into fur, wizened leather

for his feet, the hood
drawn up over his head
as he walked off into the animal
dark core of her story.
ANIMAL PRESENCE

Whining and scratching, wanting to be
let out or in, morning, night the same
white-eyed hound grating his door.
Or shaking its spots of rain,
hauling its chill into the room
to ripen, whatever it rolled
in, unrolling--fish, dung--headlines of scent
steaming the air. Mud crazes

his carpet, the warmth of his couch
covers him with hair. That hot
breath in his face, that ticking
across the tile as it winds itself,
all sex and stomach, to mutter in sleep,

to spring, barking. He jumps
shaking each time he slams the dog
and the door. How can he beat
such bad news? Leashing
never works. The beast
slips its choke, runs off and returns

to bay at the porchlight
flashing from links as he swings the chain,
to slink around him, answering
with its eyes. No matter
how hard, he cannot break
his coyote throated mutt, always
on the wrong side of its urges.
HOLDING PATTERNS

In Patagonia, nine thousand year old
chalk and ocher tracings of hands
upon the open-air rocks
at Rio Pinturas. In caverns
of France, Spain, similar
heraldry, those hands straining
to command the drawn herds,
to cover the vastness settled like dust
behind vanishing hooves—a world
dwarfing human scale held at least
fifteen thousand years at bay.

And elsewhere, rock shelters in Australia,
Utah, the Sahara, the same extended
reach of belief, red pressings on stone,
palms and fingers spread

as if to shield our eyes
from the bound flurries of sand,
the blinding flash at each grain's center,
that power within men
would come to release, burning
entire bodies into stone.
Today the geese have flown
into my sleep. Half-awake
I still hear them, passing
overhead, braying faintly
through the chilled air
of this room where I have started
the stove: Those birds
pair for life. Remember
the goose we saw circling
its mate's scattered feathers
by the lake, how we watched
as it lifted the sky
finally and flew? That sky
is inside me now. It is all I have
to say to you.
PAPAGO BASKET

Grey-green bands of yucca define
the ways of bleached grass, paths extending
from his feet, the man

stitched in devil’s-claw black
poised inside the maze
of desert colors. L’itoi.

the Papago call him: Elder Brother,
and weave the story of his wanderings
through the changing pattern

of a land in which all paths
lead from and back to self,
to center. Look, your shadow too
dries as you reach it.
The trails go on
because you follow. In the labyrinth

of light, everywhere
can take you home.
THE BUTCHER TREE

Where was I going when I found
that lizard impaled
at eye level, its throat still
pulsing in the sun? Creosote
smell of the desert after rain,
bluebottles revving and settling
on mouldered sparrow, field mice
hanging in the higher branches
gamey as old fruit. I stood there--
those thorns swollen with drops of light--held
my fingers to the lizard's belly
and was held, long
toes of its forefeet grasping
as its hindlegs kicked. All spasm
and clotted silk, what was left
of its life writhed for purchase.
Wingbeats charged the branches
above me. Cupping the lizard
in my hands, I twisted, snapped
the stem of its thorn--the shrieked
pi-pi-pi of a shrike blooming
into mockery as I lifted
the lizard down: clacks of cactus wren,
trilling of sparrow—the shrike's resurrected cries of its prey.
"Attu, 1943".............page 17:

After receiving his MD in the United States in the 1930's, Nebu Tatsuguchi returned to Japan, where he was inducted into the military. Tatsuguchi then served with his country's forces on Attu, working in an underground hospital bunker while American forces blockaded and fought to capture the island. These poems are loosely based upon the diary which was found with his body and translated by Army Intelligence.

"Selchie".................page 52:

A seal man in Irish lore. Records of Greenlandic Inuit contact with Celtic-fringe areas in Western Europe are extant from the Twelfth Century.