

Bessie Ashevak : On Storytelling

Stories are very helpful in their meanings. As a child, I was enchanted by the stories I heard. The destitute survive, and those full of fear gain courage. Reflecting upon these stories can be very helpful. Some stories are frightening or gorey, but then you always choose which side to be on. The ancestors did with very little material means, and much physical hardship and in this respect, the stories about their survival are very educational. Indeed, stories enrich our understanding.

Ammaluq Uttaq: On Storytelling

Some stories have meanings to find, others are pure entertainment. Stories usually have elements that are educational for our upcoming generations, our grandchildren for instance. They will be useful to them in the future when they are of maturity. There are lessons about life. We are the Inuit - proud of our independence (resourcefulness) - and we must contribute our knowledge and know how to our children, to our youth, to the newly married, to our children, our daughters, our sons. They haven't acquired the experiences that we elders have. This video taping of elders sharing is a way to preserve the culture. Youth can see a goal to strive for within the pride that the elders model for them - not just myself, of course. With the school systems now, our new generations will never experience what we have first hand. We have been trained through traditional means, and even if the youth watch it on TV, and then only sporadically, they can be exposed to their past to some degree. I feel very strongly that we should continue this type of project - storytelling must not ever stop. I love hearing stories from others, stories that I haven't heard. Some children get a great deal of enjoyment and entertainment from our stories. The last story that I told, I had told at the local school as well. However, it was disliked, because they were not used to storytelling, and they were squeamish about bugs that live in people's hair and on their bodies. They'd never heard about it. They didn't understand the value of the "*pihiq*", or spiritual chant which was in the story. Part of their education and development is to understand these things - pleasant or otherwise. We are people of the Arctic regions, and as such there are some practicalities of life that need to be learned. Some aspects of a story are educational and some aspects are entertainment. It's important to have a variety of elders on tape. This project should definitely continue. These are my thoughts, so I've shared them with you.

Ammaluq Uttaq

"THE MAN WHO TURNS INTO ANIMALS"

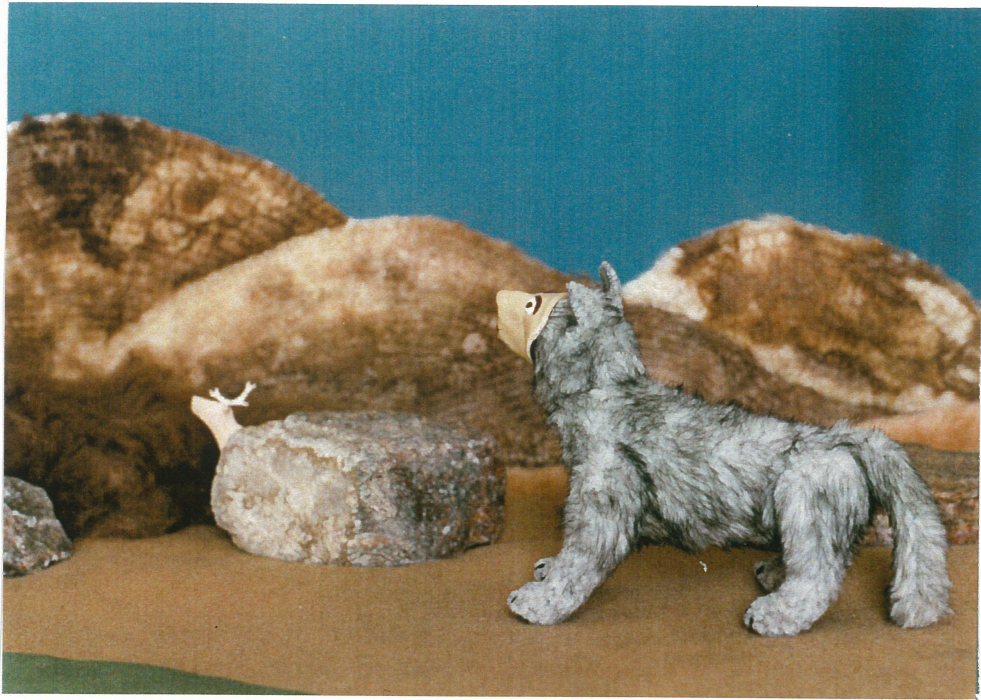
There was a man who was walking along. He came across a pack of wolves and, amazingly enough - I don't know how he did it, he became a wolf. So this human man was now one of the wolves.

Now as a wolf, he would chase the caribou for sustenance. While he was part of the chase, he would have only the meager leftovers to eat. He was becoming skinny and pale as a result of hunger and finally he asked the wolves, "What is it that you do, that you follow the caribou so fast, that you are able to catch the caribou?"

The first to speak out was a little wolf who was also somewhat outdone by the others. He instructed the new wolf to grip his claws into the ground as he bounded forward after the caribou. A while later some caribou were in sight, and when they were close, the man who was a wolf tried this technique. He gripped the ground with his claws as he bounded in his chase of the caribou. He became successful in his hunt and ate his full share.

The man decided that he was finished with being a wolf and again began to walk across the land as a human. He came across some musk oxen and turned himself into a muskox. As a muskox, he found that the habit of the musk oxen was to stay in one area most of the time. When they did move from one place to another place, it would be too long before they would move on. The musk oxen would graze in one place for quite a while. The new muskox found himself restless and bored by this and returned to being a human being.

It was summer now and the man was walking along the sea edge. He came to a shoal of devilfish which were very good at camouflaging themselves. The man turned himself into a devilfish but soon found that he was bored and restless by these fish as he had been with the muskox. They would just remain still and unobvious.



So the man went off with the seals. The seals were always on the go - constantly. The younger seals were particularly active. The seals were the exact opposite to the devilfish and the muskox who were both very inactive in comparison to these things! However they also fought terribly with their claws and scratched one another as they fought. Realizing this problem, he turned himself back into a human.

The story goes on, of course, but this is the part that I remember.



Ammaluq Uttaq

"THE CHAR AND THE DEVILFISH"

A devilfish took a char for his wife. Probably he was a bit bigger than the char. When the autumn came with the cold weather and ice was beginning to form on the ocean, the char began to make their journey up the rivers. The devilfish wanted to accompany his new partner, being that they were married, and he might miss her dearly if they were separated. But the char told the devilfish that the lake would not have food for him to eat, there would be nothing whatever to catch, and the devilfish would waste away with hunger.

"So I waste away with hunger," the devilfish told the char.

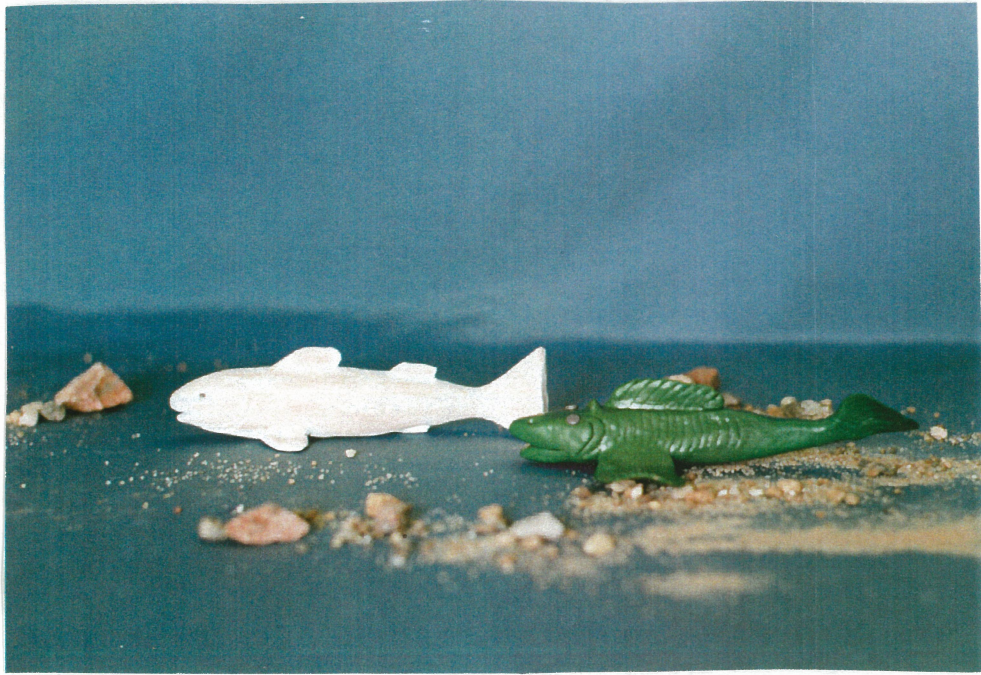
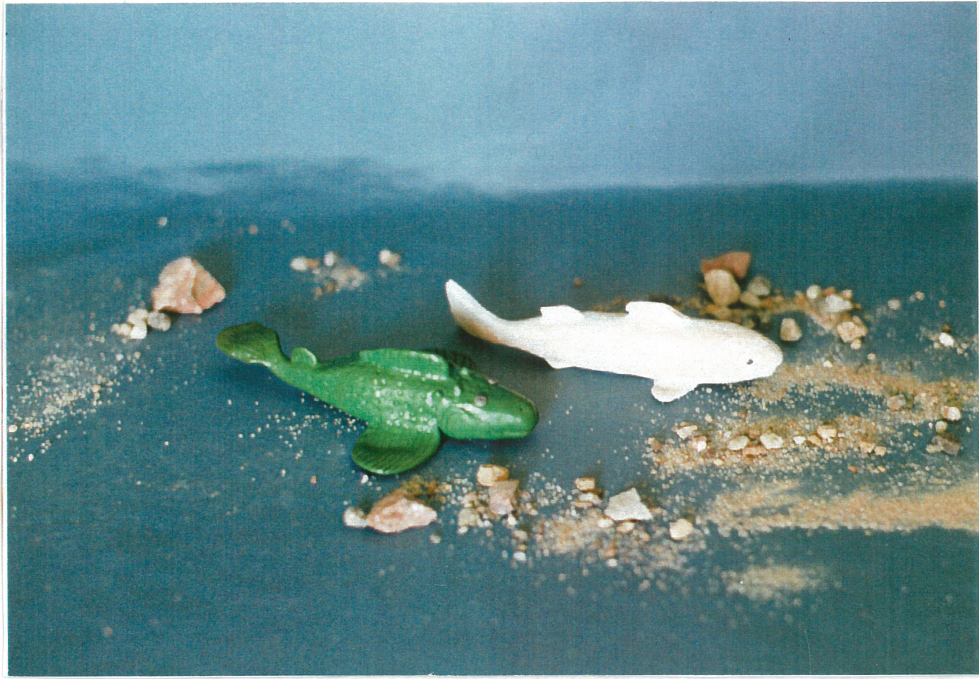
"I will stay still at the edge of a rock and conserve energy," he further argued.

He was overwhelmed with grief at the thought of separation from his wife.

So the migration of char began, and the devilfish, taking it like a man, migrated with the rest. The winter came soon and, sure enough, there was not any food to be had. The fool devilfish became scrawny with hunger. The char had thoroughly warned him, wishing for him not to be subjected to such danger. The devilfish hovered by the edge of the rock, but nevertheless, he had nothing to eat and pitifully, he wasted.

When summer came again, the char and the devilfish made their trek back to the sea. Upon their return to the sea, the devilfish fattened up quickly with so much food to catch. As fall came again and the ice was beginning to form, migration time for the char was nearing. He readily began to follow his wife the char without giving it any thought. But then he remembered being so hungry and he changed his mind.

"I'm not climbing the river with you this time. I will stay behind right here." The devilfish well remembered starving up at the lake.



Ammaluq Uttaq

"THE MOSQUITO AND THE FLY"

A mosquito and a fly were caught up in an argument. The mosquito was saying to the fly, "You have no stinger, so you could never win a fight! You have no stinger, so you could never win a fight! ". The mosquito taunted the fly with this, and went around with a big smirk, silly thing.

So the fly challenged the mosquito, "What, without a stinger, I could probably manage it! Just will power could probably do it - forget a stinger!"

The mosquito smiled even harder, barely containing himself. He was really in the argument to have a good fight, a show down perhaps. The mosquito neared the fly to pick a fight, and suddenly the fly splattered the mosquito with fly larvae! The poor mosquito cried his little mosquito eyes out - as he was covered in a mess of fly larvae. The mosquito was first so boastful because he had something to fight with. And then was overcome by an enemy he didn't the least bit fear and who seemed to have no defense.

There is a little verse that I recall from this story, it is the verse of the fly. I'll sing it for you.

Mosquito taunted, "You have no stinger, you cannot poke!"
He said that over again, and this time with a smirk!
He appears as though he won't turn away, what next...what...
aja ija aija ija aja jii...Aijaa, "Without a stinger, I could do it."
Who's smiling now? "He's not turning back, not giving up..."
what?...ija aija ija....



Bessie Ashevak

"FOX AND LEMMING"

The lemming, as it walked by the sea shore, said teasingly to the fox, "Going so fine in a straight line, o dear! Why is that, huh?" That's what the lemming called out to the fox.

And the fox called back to the lemming chiding him, "O wonder of legs, your face is round, round, round."



The Fox and the Lemming
told by Bessie Ashevak

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Bessie Asheevak

"THE LEMMING WHO WOULDN'T PLAY"

There was a lemming and a human, both were young females. The human said, "Lemming, let us play!"

But the lemming replied, "I do not want to play."

The human tried again, asking, "Lemming, I plead, let us play!"

"But no, I do not want to! I'm digesting my storage," was the lemming's reply.

The human called out, "This old old one has now to digest so slowly."

The lemming replied, "It's fine having a big stomach when you are an animal!"



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Bessie Asheevak

"THE FAMILY OF RAVENS"

There was a pair of ravens with children - probably two young ones. I'd say. They were in an old snow house, or iglu, which had been abandoned by the people who used it. The ravens were hungry and there was no food. The male raven was poking at the old food storage area with his beak, and the wife raven was pecking at the woman's oil lamp table. They were both scrounging for food bits.

The little ravens were overcome with joy at the thought of food and jumping up and down saying, "My mommy is greatly pecking at the lamp table! My daddy is greatly pecking at the storage space! What excitement! What will they uncover? QQQAA!!!"



**The Family of Ravens
told by Bessie Ashevak**

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Bessie Asheevak

"THE LOST NEEDLE"

A woman had lost her sewing needle and was diligently looking for it. As she was looking for it, there came a raven overhead. The woman called out to the raven , "O big raven up high, perhaps you know where my needle might be?"

But the raven called back, "No! Not a chance!"

The woman called out to the raven again, "Where is it??? Where is it???"

Then the raven crowed , "In the door way! In the door way!"

The woman called up to the raven again and asked, "Just what part of it? Just what part of it?"

The raven repeated, "In the door way! In the door way!" and then added, "Yeeeehh, in the center! Yeeeehh, in the center!" With that the raven led her to the spot .

There was a bend in the ledge and the woman looked inside. There in the corner she found her precious needle. She looked at it a commented on how nicely made and fine the needle's eye was.



Bessie Asheevak

"THE WOLF AND THE FOX"

Some wolves had a den that had an adjoining porch shared by two foxes who were grandmother and grandchild. The wolves had a great store of caribou meat. The fox pair they shared a porch with had nothing. One of the wolf's young ones would visit the fox grandmother and grandchild and would be chewing on caribou fat, a treat called 'tunnuq'. The grandchild fox would be so envious when he saw the visitor chewing this treat. Because the grandchild fox was always suffering from envy when the little wolf came, the grandmother fox said to the wolf one time, "Drop that morsel!" And so the wolf dropped it.

Then the grandmother fox said to the morsel, "Turn into a rock!" and as it fell to the ground it became a rock. She did this with all of the food that the wolves had and it all became stone, therefore they had no food left. The wolves began to howl and whine, "Our meats have all turned to stone!!! Miuqqqqq."

They repeated it over and over as they howled, "Mmmiuqqq, Mmmiiuuqqq!"

After turning the food to stones and rocks, the foxes left that place. They went walking towards where people would be situated, but came across a large number of foxes. These foxes were hovered around a whale carcass. There was an abundance of food - no hunger here. The grandmother fox decided to stay at this new place, and they were able to eat food here.

The wolves packed up their camp and moved on as well. They moved along on the trail of the foxes. The wolves were almost arriving to the foxes camp when the grandmother fox saw them. Just as they were arriving, the fox grandmother went out to where they were and called out, "People with meat - you made us unwelcome, treated us poorly, kak ka ka ka ka kak."

Without even arriving into the camp, the wolves turned around and, with sad, despondent faces, they went back to where they came from.



Neeveovak Marniq

"THE RAVEN WITH THE GEESE WIVES"

A raven had two geese for his wives. It was summer when they met and soon fall came with the cold weather and snow covering. The geese were beginning to migrate back to the warm place, as we see them do so each year. So the migrating was in process, and they were flying in their v-shape. Because the raven was married to these two geese who were also going to go south, he also wanted to go along. He would miss them if he spent the winter without them. They devised a way for the raven to 'swim' when he was tired of flying on the long journey south. The two geese would land side by side in the water and the raven would perch on their backs. They would be sort of like a boat for the raven who could not swim.

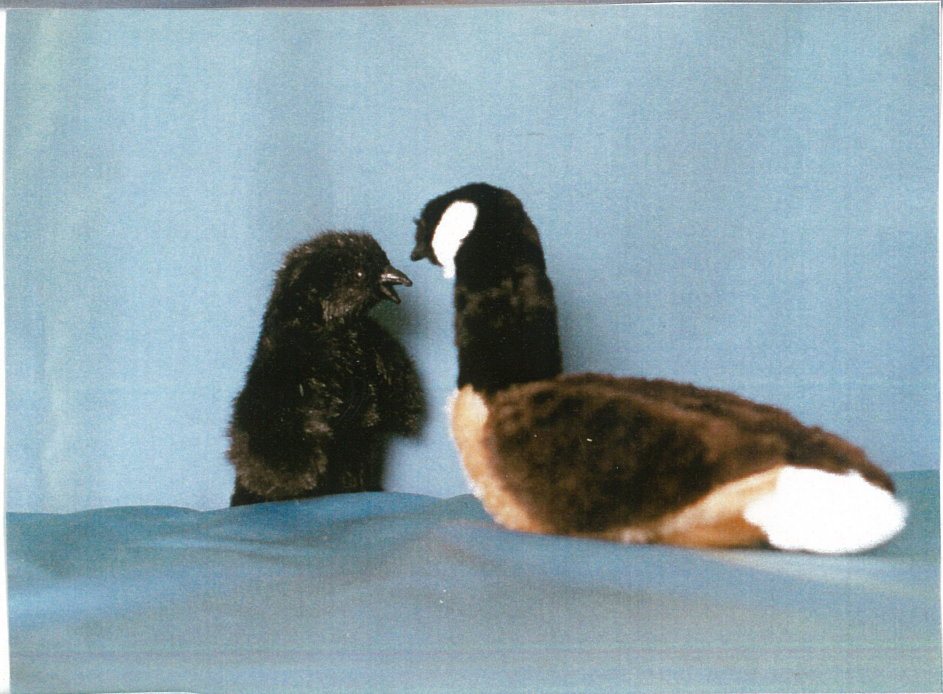
It took the geese wives longer than the others to travel this way. They were in danger of freezing, as winter was setting in. They stopped on some land, but after that patch of land there was a great expanse of water.

The raven decided to try to fly to the other side of the water as there were other birds that could do it. Sure enough though, he became tired. He called upon his wives to join together to make a landing spot in the water. He was exhausted and cried out in complaint. He walked upon their back shoulder blades and their feathers became worn thin in that spot. The raven depended on the geese wives for a resting spot in the water every time he was tired, so their backs were worn bald from where his feet rubbed. It was becoming seriously cold by now, and there was nothing but water ahead of them.

The other geese noticed this situation and advised the geese wives to do something for themselves because they were getting cold. The geese finally decided that the next time he ordered the wives to join together to provide a landing spot, they would join but then part again before the raven landed.

They were suffering and although the other geese suggested that they do that, they felt obligated to help their husband.

The raven lagged behind again, as he had many a time before, and called out to instruct the geese wives to join one another on the water's surface. They joined together on the water but just as he was about to land on their backs



again, they parted and he landed into the water. He cried out, "I'm sinking!"

"Up to where?" the geese asked.

"To my calves approximately..." he answered. He called out again, "I'm sinking...!!!"

"Up to where?" the geese wives inquired.

"Up to my thighs now!!!" the raven replied. "Where??" they asked.

"Well, all the way up my back now!!!" He tried desperately to jump up out of the water to save himself, yelping, "I'm sinking! I'm sinking!"

Soon, nothing but a remnant of the raven was apparent at the water's surface. The wives inquired, "Is it that you are sinking?? To about where?" "Up to my such-and-such" the raven would answer and eventually he vanished without a trace, sinking down into the water.





Neeveovak Marniq

"THE SHAMAN"

In the summer the people would go caribou hunting. They would pack their bow and their arrow on their back because they wouldn't have had guns back then. There was a shaman walking along looking for caribou and he saw a tent pitched on a rise of land. He decided to go and meet the people.

Strangely, no one came out as he approached the tent. The people were not out and about because the husband was inside and was ill. He was quite sick and the poor children were inside there too. The wife was afraid of losing him and she cried as she tried to prepare some food. She got out a beautiful, thin caribou skin which was very nicely tanned. She beseeched the shaman to

accept this for payment in return for making her husband well. It was the custom to give the healer some gift. She gave him the skin, and he healed her husband and then stayed awhile with them before moving on.

He left their camp with the caribou skin tied to his back pack, such a fine dark shiny skin it was! As he walked along, though, he felt the pack was all of a sudden lighter. He walked for a while, then looked behind to check his pack and there was a lemming skin there instead of a caribou skin!! In frustration he took it and threw it to the ground. There lay a little tanned lemming pelt!

On his way back home from hunting, he decided to drop in on the people he had visited. When he arrived at the spot, there was no tent and merely some foxes playing. He had been fooled into experiencing these foxes as a family of people. The more he thought about it the angrier he became. He recounted the whole story to the others when he arrived back home.



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Ammaluq Uttaq

"THE DEVILFISH AND THE PTARMIGAN"

A cute little ptarmigan careened the shore of the ocean and then landed right there at the beach. Right in front the the ptarmigan in the shallow waters was a devilfish, trying not to look obvious. That sweet little ptarmigan asked, " (words need checking) ".

The devilfish offered back, "Ptarmigan! Up there! OOO, because he has so much fat, his calves are huge!".

The ptarmigan gave the answer, " (words to check) ".



Ammaluq Uttaq

"THE OWL AND THE POLAR BEAR"

A proud polar bear was assuredly walking over the chunky tide-ice. A snowy owl flew over head and landed right at the spot on the ice that the bear was heading for. And then the owl taunted the polar bear, "What a great way you walk! What a great way you walk! You'll end up moving along close to the ground!"

The polar bear retorted, "And you'll have to change diapers!" He chanted this over and over.

The owl just laughed and became excited. The bear got very angry and bounded after the owl. Now just as he almost reached the owl and could just about bite his teeth into the wretched thing, the owl laughed and suddenly flew out of reach. What frustration!



Neeveovak Marniq

"THE MUSKOX"

Some people were sneaking up upon a gathering of mature male muskoxen, and one of them announced a fighting match. The chosen muskox was a nervous thing and ran in a circle saying he was scared. He declined from the challenge to butt - you know how they have a butting match like on TV. When male muskox butt, they bump up against one another and let out a strange noise. Well, any way, there was a challenge put out, and the muskox were being crept up upon.

Back then, people would use their dogs to track muskox and polar bear. They wouldn't go by skidoo, of course. So the muskox were being tracked by some people with dogs. The dogs usually run after the bears or muskox and would stall them in a fight while the hunters went for the game. The two muskox who were sort of in a burrow were isolated from the others and the pack of dogs came upon them. They took to chasing them to the hills.

One of the muskox said, "I'm a proud little male, so I will stand waiting for those barking enemies." One of the muskox ran on and the other stayed as he had decided. The muskox that was left behind was seized by the dogs and killed. The remaining of the pair was well on his way up the hill.

(she forgot then remembered some more of the story)

The muskox that wasn't so nervous as the other was saying "Hiitititititititiiiiiii !! Hihtititititititiiiiiii! " to tease the other into a fighting match. And dogs are usually frightened of the game they chase, be it a polar bear, or a muskox. But then they chorus out together in loud barking and that stops the animal that they are chasing.





