

I Hope It Don't Rain Tonight. Phillip Igloliorti.

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I Hope It Don't Rain Tonight. Phillip Igloliorti. Fredericton: Broken Jaw Press, 1998. 72 pp., \$11.95, paper, ISBN 0-921411-57-x.

ROBIN McGRATH

FIFTY YEARS AGO, Inuit had the reputation of being among the best pre-literate poets known to the Western world. There was a certain irony in the fact that Inuit poetry was lauded only after it had almost ceased to exist, but the interest that Knud Rasmussen, Svend Frederiksen and, later, John Robert Colombo stimulated in the old spontaneous compositions convinced people that literature does not have to be written to be worthy of the name. Phillip Igloliorti goes a step further and demonstrates in his first full-length poetry collection that literature does not even have to be literary to be worthy of the name. This observation is offered without malice. Igloliorti's poetry, when judged by the usual standards of such work in English, is lamentable, yet it has a power and an impact that makes it interesting and at times even compelling reading.

Traditional Inuit poems were loosely categorized by Rasmussen as songs of mood, hunting songs, chants and incantations, and songs of derision. Modern Inuit poetry tends to fit into similar divisions, although hunting songs have evolved into poems heavy with political content, and charms or chants have been adapted to accommodate Christianity. The ability to develop close personal relationships outside the family has accrued considerable importance in post-contact Inuit life, with the result that modern Inuit poetry now tends to focus on romantic love rather than sex or marriage, but pensive songs of mood are still being written, as are satirical songs of derision.

Phillip Igloliorti fits easily into the patterns of form and content that can be found in Inuit poets and musicians elsewhere in Canada. Like Mary Panegoosho

and Charlie Panagoniak, he sometimes composes short, reflective works that are almost imagistic in their approach, but like most of the younger poets, typified by Alootook Ipellie, he uses poetic structures, including rhyme and scansion, better suited to English than to Inuktitut.

Igloliorti's experiments in English poetics are not a success. Consider the following opening verses of three poems chosen at random: "My mother dear,/I love you dear/ my waterfall of tears/ is filled" ("Waterfall of tears"); "I cry my tears/in rains that fall/ hiding the pain/that is never small" ("Tears in the rain"); "We sometimes fight,/ resolve with a kiss,/ ignoring at times/ what I have to fix" ("Afraid of Losing you"). Throughout the book, his rhyme is not just inexact but downright discordant. The grating near misses are made worse by an adherence to rhyme schemes that are only consistent enough to allow for betrayal. He is also like the man whose limericks never would scan, because he always tries to "put as many words into the last line as he possibly can." Add to that bad grammar (as distinct from dialect such as can be found in the title of the book), muddy logic, and what even Seamus O Ceallaigh, who wrote the introduction to the collection, calls "cliché" and the "linguistic relics of pop culture" and you have some very bad poetry indeed.

If this was all that could be said about Igloliorti's work, there would be little reason to waste more printer's ink discussing it, but it is impossible for this reader to dismiss the gut-wrenching content. Some of the poems are about sexual abuse, and many more are about the loneliness and isolation that inevitably follow on a childhood full of physical and emotional terror. If the child survivors of the infamous concentration camp, Terezin, wrote poetry, this is what it might be like.

One hundred years ago, explicit sex was a common subject in Inuit poetry. When the poet Netsit discussed men's impotence, he was not just being metaphorical. The unidentified man who composed the song of longing for Analuk's wife, the singer Kibkarjuk who accused Utahania of desiring his own younger sister, Haquyaaq who was willing to risk being stabbed so she could dance beside the man from Kanghiryuaq, rarely held back on the details of these desires. Even the hunting songs of the old Inuit poets were overtly sexual. Yet forty years ago, when Inuit poetry in English began to appear, sexual matters were avoided. By the late 1960s, one did not encounter anything remotely like the blunt treatment of sexuality in Inuit poems that the traditional poets produced.

This book breaks that missionary-imposed taboo. Sex in Igloliorti's poetry is raw, painful, confused, as likely to lead to anger as to fulfillment. As a survivor of child sexual abuse, he is torn between the imposed homosexual experiences that he both endured and desired, and the heterosexual love that has given him a wife and child he adores. The anger and confusion that results from these dichotomies are expressed in terms of natural phenomena such as tornadoes, avalanches, and waterfalls. One of the better poems that uses such a metaphor is "Exhausted Trees," in which trees covered in glitter are so weighed down that they are suicidal.

Throughout the poems the only erotic touch the poet really enjoys is wind on his skin, a sensation that is safe, distant, removed from human contact. The longing for security and the inability to endure closeness is heartbreaking.

Obviously, Phillip Igloliorti's poetry is a form of therapy for him, and it would probably be very useful in treating other survivors of child abuse, but that isn't the purpose of poetry. Poetry may heal, but if it is written for that purpose, in my opinion, it usually fails as poetry. Igloliorti clearly believes he is writing something that has poetic value, or he might have simply gone on Oprah or written a tell-all autobiography. His intent is evident in the very forms he chooses to use and fails to use successfully.

There is probably not a person alive in Canada today who does not recognize that a collection of words in iambic tetrameter with an ABAB rhyme scheme is in some way poetic. The dozens of nursery rhymes, ballads and popular songs that bubble up out of the memories of unlitrary — even illiterate — people are most often in that form, or one similar. Possibly Igloliorti wishes to put his feelings and thoughts into a shape that he and others recognize as poetry, because sometimes those feelings and thoughts are simply too big and too important to be contained in anything common or prosaic.

Igloliorti is not alone in his desire to use familiar English poetic forms of rhyme and scansion to elevate his thoughts. Labrador writers such as Bob Palliser, Christine Poker and Rose Gregoire, not to mention numerous young unpublished Labrador writers, all choose rhyme and scansion rather than the less restrictive free verse. The reason such writers choose a verse form that even skilled first-language speakers find difficult to use is unclear. Perhaps to the writer for whom English is not a mother tongue (even if it is the only language the writer speaks), *deep* and *bleak*, *soul* and *gold*, sound the same. Perhaps the fractured scansion sounds fine to writers who come from a tradition where a song may be in 3-4 time and the drum that accompanies it may be in 2-4, or notes are deliberately flattened or sharpened so that they seem incorrect to the Western ear. Possibly these writers are using the only forms they are sure will be accepted as poetic by the dominant society.

The answer to the puzzle that is Aboriginal poetry today is education. Writers must be educated so that when they fracture a rhyme scheme or a line length, they are doing it to some purpose, and readers must be educated so that they are open to new poetic forms and devices that may be borrowed from an older Aboriginal tradition, or invented to accommodate a new one. In the meantime, Igloliorti's *I Hope It Don't Rain Tonight* provides readers a glimpse into the mind of at least one of the many First Nations people who have managed to wrest some artistic satisfaction out of a language they speak by default, a tradition that mocked their own, a culture that appropriated their voices and denied them validity. Broken Jaw Press took a great chance when it decided to publish these poems, but it was the right decision and I have no doubt Phillip Igloliorti's next book will be better, because he has courage and a fierce need to be heard. He deserves an audience.