

# aqsarniit / Aurorae

For the Inuit of Canada's arctic, the Aurora Borealis, or "Northern Lights" as southerners call them, aren't "Northern" at all, they're right overhead.

In the Inuktitut language, they are called "aqsarniit", and according to some Inuit myths, they represent the spirits of ancestors, who can communicate with people in dreams when the aurorae appear in the sky. That myth is the launching point for the narrative of "aqsarniit / Aurorae".

**NOTE:** All titles (including the title of the piece itself), are shown in both Inuktitut, the Inuit language, and English. I've used the Roman orthography for writing the Inuktitut titles, except for on the cover image above, which shows Inuktitut using both the Roman orthography, and Inuktitut syllabics. When using Roman orthography, Inuktitut generally does not use capital letters.

My fascination and reverence for the Inuit culture of the Canadian arctic began with an extended stay in Pond Inlet (Mittimatalik), Nunavut in the late 1980's. The community welcomed me, and I was lucky enough to be able to learn about Inuit culture, stories, legends and experience first-hand their incredibly rich and wise ways. I kept an extensive journal of my experiences, and in the fullness of time, I returned to these pages to find inspiration for this piece. The Inuit are excellent storytellers, so it seemed logical to use a narrative to set the direction for the music. These program notes explain the narrative for each of the nine sections of the piece..

I am not Inuk myself, but my love and respect for their ancient and beautiful culture is vast, and I hope that the nine sections of this piece do some justice to the wonderful people and culture that I was lucky enough to be able to observe at close hand.



Steve Sauder, 2024



## **1. singnaktuumajuq / The Dream**

The story begins on the arctic tundra in the twilight of winter. A mere speck on the vast snow-covered landscape, an igloo glows gently with warm light from its interior. It was constructed earlier by an Inuit man (an “Inuk”), possibly in his early thirties, who is the main character of our story. He is sitting in his igloo with his multi-generational extended family around him. He is sleepy and drowsing, but they are talking, laughing and playing games, including katajjait (throat singing), a friendly competition between two women, which he hears hazily as he drifts from consciousness into the dream-world. Kaleidoscopic dream images swirl around him. Outside the igloo, the Aurorae billow in the sky, and seem to dip down from the heavens toward the lonely igloo, a point of light on the frozen tundra. Perhaps they want to tell our Inuk something...

## **2. nagligusuktuq / In Love**

Still in control of his own dreams, the Inuk dreams of the love he has for his family and his wife, of how they met when they were younger, and how much he cares for all of them. This gentle introduction to dreaming is to be short-lived, as his dream is about to be hijacked by the Aurorae ...

## **3. angunasuktuq / The Hunt**

Without warning, he is dreaming he is in the middle of a hunt, travelling with other Inuit on dog-sleds, rushing very fast toward something ... perhaps there has been a narwhal killed by one of the hunters! The excitement of the chase consumes his dream self, and he is under the spell of the Aurorae.

## **4. nanuq / The Polar Bear**

A large polar bear appears on the ice, loping along with its strange rhythmless gait, likely intent on the same prize as the hunters! They hurry, hoping to get there first, but the bear keeps pace and a confrontation appears imminent. Our hero is suddenly distracted, however, by a strange sight over the water out beyond the edge of the ice...

## 5. ujurumiak / The Mirage

The dream-hunt forgotten, our Inuk stops and stares at a mirage. Caused by temperature inversions over the cold arctic seawater, water mirages (called Fata Morgana elsewhere in the world) are common in the arctic, and can make very distant objects seem to loom above the water, often upside-down or almost unrecognizable as their original forms - sometimes looking like huge castles on the horizon. The Inuk walks toward to the edge of the ice floe, transfixed by the shimmering sight. This is not a good idea.

## 6. qallupilluit



The Qallupilluit are mythical sea-creatures, who live in the cold arctic ocean, usually hiding under the ice, waiting to catch unsuspecting children or unwise adults who wander too close to the edge of the ice floe.

Like our Inuk is doing now.

Seeing their chance, the Qallupilluit attack our hero, catching him by surprise, despite the smell of sulfur that the creatures give off. He races across the ice, giving them a good chase, and puts up a brave fight, but they are fast, and determined, and eventually they have him in their scaly grasp.

However, instead of taking him to their lair and eating him (or whatever Qallupilluit actually do with their victims), they instead pick him up and bodily throw him (in dreams, you are very light) out into the ocean, far away from the safety of land or ice.

In a panic, our hero realizes that he has become paralyzed, and, unable to swim, he begins to sink into the dark cold depths.



## 7. **sanna / Sedna**

Down he sinks ... to his amazement, he finds he is able to breathe under water ... down, ever down into the depths, to the dark cold place where Sedna, Inuit Goddess of the Sea, lives at the bottom of the ocean. Sedna is a friend to the Inuit, providing them with fish and sea mammals from her ocean bounty, which has allowed them to survive in the harsh arctic wilderness for millennia. This is why when a sea creature is killed by the Inuit, every part is used in some way, and the hunter must always remember to make an offering to Sedna to thank her for her kindness.

So it is, that our Inuk is not afraid when he finds himself at the bottom of the sea, looking upon the Goddess Sedna. She is surrounded by whales, dolphins, seals and other ocean animals, and more appear to be growing from the stumps of her fingers. Their plaintive calls reverberate in the deep.

Somehow, our Inuk knows that Sedna has things to tell him, but that he must ask her for assistance. Finding himself able to speak under water as well, he begins to ask questions, his human voice almost too small to be heard, amidst the songs of the whales.

When Sedna answers his questions, her voice is like thunder, and the love-sighs of his wife, and the voice of his mother when he was a child, all at the same time. Her answers to his questions are full of divine wisdom, but the Inuk is retreating from Sedna, from the ocean, from the dream-world, and the sound of whales and Sedna speaking begins to merge with...

## 8. **katajjait / Throat Singing**

... the throat-singing game that he was listening to as he fell asleep. Now he is awake again, and no time seems to have passed, everything in the warm little igloo is as it was, his precious family surrounds him. He cannot quite recall what valuable information Sedna had bestowed upon him, but he knows that the

knowledge is within him, and will be available when he needs it in the future. For now, he is happy to be wrapped in the love of his family, and when one of the women makes a mistake in the throat-singing game, he laughs along with everyone else.

## **9. inaqu / Lullaby**

As the night deepens (for it is always night in the arctic winter, just different shades of it), the flame in the *kulik* (oil lamp) gets lower, and it is time for bed. Everyone in the family climbs into their warm fur-lined beds, carved by our Inuk himself from the same blocks of ice he used to construct the house. Everyone is warm and dry, and as he looks around in the dim orange lamp-light, he feels a sense of pride, in having built a good sturdy house; a sense of security, knowing that his intelligent and practical wife will keep the *kulik* flame burning low next to their bed all night, waking periodically to tend to it quietly as everyone else sleeps, warmed by its glow; and a sense of love and hope for the future for his family. When the gentle lullaby is over, everyone is asleep.

Outside, unseen by all, the Aurora Borealis flicker far away in the heavens, having delivered their message to the Inuk successfully.