

A Presentation

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As Saamis, we cannot give a proper presentation of ourselves without talking about our ancestors. Therefore I shall begin by telling you about my mother.

My mother lived in the first half of this century. She died in 1952. She knew very little of the technical aids of modern living. She sometimes used the telephone and she was taken in a boat with an out-board engine to the hospital where she died. Otherwise she lived like her foremothers had done for hundreds of years before her—with one difference. In 1852 a church was built in Utsjok, a Finnish church. Thus the Finnish State captured Utsjok through Christianity. Church and State were for Finns, while the people of Utsjok were Saamis. Utsjok is the village I come from.

More than merely a generation lies between my mother's life and value-system and my own. My grandmother would not have had the words to describe my present life in Tromsø and my great-grandmother would have called me a changeling. My present life is a mere shadow of great-grandmother's existence. My foremothers knew who they were. They enjoyed equality with the men in the primary industries of reindeer-keeping and hunting, and were active in trading and establishing contacts with people outside the home. In addition they bore and raised the new generations. They made sure that a girl married the richest husband and a boy got the most able and hard-working wife. Our foremothers never spoke of love. Their breasts were not for sale. Their bodies were nobody else's property. They offered the hospitality of their bodies freely. If their periods stopped, they had medicines to deal with the problem. The old wisdom died with my mother.

My mother came from the Norwegian and my father from the Finnish side of Saamiland. My family lived on the Finnish side of the border river, Tana. I was in the upper forms when I learnt at school that one side of the river was Finnish and the other Norwegian. The new road came to our valley when I was 17 years old. The road

brought bad times, as my foremothers had predicted. They called it the road of hunger. Many of us had to leave the valley and I am still on the road. I have not built my house yet. On the Finnish side I bore two children who became Norwegian citizens because their father is Norwegian. My youngest child is born on the Norwegian side. He became a Finnish citizen because I am Finnish. Now we are all Norwegian citizens. My children speak three languages. So does my daughter's pet dog. We live in Tromsø, the capital of Northern Norway.

The value-system of my childhood, my language, everything has turned topsy-turvy again and again. I started to write when I was quite young in order to keep my head above water. And I am still writing but now I am more conscious about what I am doing. To begin with, I wrote in Finnish because I went to a Finnish school. The new Saami political movement was founded when I was still young and Finland and everything Finnish became our enemy. For this reason I began to write in my mother tongue. I had not learnt to read and write in Saami. Our way of writing was heavily influenced by the traditions of Finnish nationalism.

When I had filled my quota of marriages and childbearing, I went to the University of Tromsø to study my mother tongue properly. I was 36 when I learned to write Saami. I used to wake up at night in a panic, thinking my new knowledge had vanished.

I have been a handicraft-worker, a freelance journalist on Finnish and Saami papers and radio, a teacher and housemistress of a boarding school, and headmistress of the Saami nursery school in Tromsø. All this I have done for a living. But now, at the age of 42, I have found my proper niche in life. At present I am working on a project for the Saami Museum in Karasjok. I am compiling a book of interviews with Saami women, to be published under the title *Samiske kvinner forteller* (Saami Women Tell Their Story). I was asked to do this because I have been interviewing Saami women, over a ten-year period, about childrearing, food customs, and about their own lives. I have been doing it for private reasons. I needed to find out who I am.

In my first collection of poems, *Jie at vulget* (The Ice Breaks), 1980, I wrote about women's lives and the world of my childhood. My next book of poems, *Báze dearvan Biehtár* (Goodbye Peter), 1981, is about the Saami boy Biehtár, who leaves the sweetheart of his childhood, his mother and his grandmother and is converted to the foreign life. In my third collection, *Losses beaivegirji* (Heavy Diary), 1986, I wrote about the burden of modern women, having to fulfil

traditional roles as well as the claims and expectations of modern living.

Who reads Saami literature?

Our own people. There are so few of us. Only about 60,000. Half of them do not know Saami. We have three Saami languages: Kildin, Southern Saami and Northern Saami. About 20,000 people speak Northern Saami. This is the largest group and the one to which I belong. My generation had no education in their mother tongue. Children in the central Saami areas, born after 1960, have learnt Saami at school. These are our hope. Ours is indeed a growing readership.

We have quite a few writers in Saamiland but most of them come from the Finnish side. Very few are able to make a living of their writing and fewer still will grow rich by it! Writing is mostly a hobby. The time is still far off when writers can hope to live by their pens.

However, when our potential readership comes of age and Saami writers in a distant future are awarded permanent grants and publishing is subsidised as a matter of course, Saami literature will begin to grow apace.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following six poems were among those originally published in Saami in *Losses Beavergirji* (DAT Publishers, 1986), ISBN 82-90625-01-4 and are reproduced with permission of the author. The English translations have been provided for *The Northern Review* by Marit Berge and Harald Gaski.

Čiero oabbá

Čiero oabbá
váidal eadni
divtte isidat meannudit
suova vuotnámat vearidit
váldde eallima vuostá
giitte ja rámit
báلكá lea sturis
viges bivttas
sáttu ja sámmál kruvdnun
ja divrras árbi
man lonistit niedasat
vai sus maid nieidasis
árbi
maid fievrridit
buolvvas bulvii

Cry sister
grieve mother
let your husband rage
your mother-in-law grind her teeth
welcome life
embrace the strife
the reward is great
a white shawl
sand and moss for a crown
a precious heritage
to buy free for your daughter
that she for her daughter
has an inheritance
to pass on
for generations to come

Várra nu váigat

Várra nu váigat
nođiid bealistit
buohtalagai ovdánit
várre váigadit muitalit
mo noađđi deaddá

Probably so difficult

Probably so difficult
to even the burdens
to grow side by side
probably heavier to tell
how the burden weighs

Ledjen rohkadallan

Ledjen rohkadallan
beahcevuovddi losses jaskatvuot̄a
háldin njuvčča suvdilis sojiid
guoli čalmmiid
ja dán fielladeaddji váimmu sadjai
ledjen sávvan šalles geađggi

I prayed
for the gloomy silence of a spruce-forest
wanted the wings of a swan
the eyes of a fish
and instead of this uneasy heart
I asked for a slippery stone

Nu guhkás láhppon

Nu guhkás láhppon
goasii jo gávdnamin
amas oahpis
lagabu vielja
eatni gieđa lieggaseabbo
amas sániid doidagasas
luottat rahpaseamin
amas mearaidii
dulvvi fárrui

So far astray
as almost to find my way
alien familiar
closer to my brother
mother's hand warmer
soaked in strange words
paths opening
towards unknown seas
with the flood

Bákti jearai

Bákti jearai
manin gatnjalat
ja miestta vástidii
it go oainne iežat gatnjaliid
dastánaga bákti rabistii iežas
ja ája golgagoṭṭii čieknalasas
bávttii siste

Asked the rock
why the tears
Said the bush
don't you see your own tears
at once the rock opened
a fountain welled
from the deep

Miesta unnui ja unnui

Miesta unnui ja unnui
ja veahá ovdalaš
go leai rissin goikan
jearai bákti
jámát go dál
miesta mieđihii
ja váidalii goikku
bákti buoššudii iežas
ja celkkii
gávdbijit nannosit miestagat
mat birgejit unnit čáziin

The bush was shrivelling away

The bush was shrivelling away
and just before
it turned to shrub
asked the rock
are you dying now
a nod from the bush
complained of thirst
boastfully the rock
declared
there are tougher bushes
that live on less water than you