Pitu lay on the ice, huddled into a ball, clinging to his tools. He thought of his dogs, especially Miki. There was nothing else to think of, other than his occasional remembrance of how horrified he was. He tried to think of home and his mother and Saima, but that brought only bad feelings, not comfort. The strength of the wind was blowing him around in all directions, toy- ing with him and terrorizing him.

When he finally opened his eyes again, they were sore from being shut so tightly for such a long period of time. The sky above was a pure and unalter- ing shade of grey that hurt Pitu’s eyes, like an overcast day in spring. After several moments, he gathered enough strength to push himself up into a seated position.

He was no longer on an endless expanse of smooth ice; instead he was now sitting at the bottom of a hill in the middle of the day. The air was cool, but not bracing. Everywhere he looked, there was white snow. The sea ice he’d been blown across was adjacent to him. As far as he could see, there were no signs of life, no tracks in the snow. Even the air felt dead, as the strong winds had completely vanished. The things that would be typical of a shoreline, like tidal ice, rocks peeking through the
snow, meandering fox tracks, and constant wind, were not present, making everything seem smooth and unnatural.

He looked around some more, searching but finding no trace of his dogs. His heartbeat quickened. Although the landscape was vastly unnerving, there was also a sense of vague familiarity, like it was his world shown to him through the stillness of a lake. A reflection of the truth. He could see peaks in the distance, and the hill he sat upon was a part of a range of ancient, weather-softened mountains, not unlike the ones his village camped along.

“Qimmitt!” Pitu shouted into the strange land. “Come here! Dogs!”

There were no distant barks or howls in answer, just the echo of his voice. Pitu continued to shout for several moments, more out of confusion and disbelief than the thought that they might hear him. The last time he had glimpsed the huskies, they’d been running away with his sled full of gear. They were long gone by now, probably back at camp. Anaa-na would be worried, sending all the hunters in the camp and in nearby Iglulik to search for him. It could take days for him to return, and he was afraid to start a journey when he did not know where he was. What if he chose the wrong way and started a journey in the opposite direction of his camp? He wouldn’t know anything until he saw another person.

He thought solemnly of the promise he’d made to Saima. He worried that she might think he had left and disappeared on purpose because he was too afraid of marrying her. He quickly dismissed the ridiculous thought. He’d been told too many times this past summer that the whole village knew he wanted her to be his wife. There’s no way Saima would think I left to hide from my commitments, he thought. It could take weeks until he could explain to her what had happened, but he believed that she would wait for him.

After sitting at the bottom of the hillside for what felt like hours, shouting until his throat was raw and sore, Pitu finally got to his feet. In either hand he held the snow knife and harpoon, using the latter as a walking stick. There was no way the dogs wouldn’t have heard him, unless he had travelled farther than the wind could possibly have taken them. Pitu knew that there were many things wrong about the whole situation, but he still refused to believe it.

Once he began to move and walk up the hill, Pitu’s senses slowly returned to him. The strangeness of the land around seemed to be speaking to him. Pitu felt that he was no longer in the same land that he had been in. The feeling he had felt last summer in the fog was gone. No longer was he filled with peace and purpose. Now, he was enveloped in hostility. He was not at home here. The thought brought an ache to his chest. He thought of Saima, of how close they had been only this morning. The thoughts overwhelmed him and he chose not to dwell on them any longer.

A gust of wind blew over the hill. It carried the sound of a wailing woman.

Pitu started up the hill at a quick pace, more out of excitement at the prospect of seeing another person and finding answers than out of concern for why the woman might be crying.

At the crest of the hill, he saw three women huddled together on another expanse of ice, this one more normal looking than the one he had just slid across for what seemed to be miles and miles. Jagged boulders of ice jutted out vertically as signs of the ocean’s tides. The women were just a bit farther than the field of ice boulders, staring down into an open crack before them. Another gust of wind swept over him, and Pitu could hear the pathetic crying again.

He made his way down the hillside, calling out to the women. The wind would not carry his words toward them. Pitu walked as quickly as he could without wearing down his energy. When he reached the pillars of ice sticking out of the frozen water, the looming figures towered over him. The ice seemed to cast imaginary shadows underneath their scrutinizing gaze, but in the bland light, it was impossible to truly see the dark shapes the shadows would form. The feeling lingered, though, that there was something terrifying about these jagged figures, some breath of life hiding in their cracks.

I never felt so small, Pitu thought. Not even next to the mountains they went to hunt by in the summer, not even when he paddled the qajaq on great expanses of open water, nor at the sight of the huge bowhead whales in the sea. The beauty of those things far outweighed the formidable danger they could entail. These towering hunks of ice were alien, sharp, and terrible. Pitu felt like they were the ghosts of evil men, taunting him as he hiked through. With the wind carrying the wailing cries of the women through the sharp passage, the place was nightmarish. He sped through the narrow spaces between each formation, a hopeless need to leave the area propelling him forward. He felt the prickles of fright on the back of his neck, the cold sweat coming from his skin. He stumbled through, jumping over dark cracks in which he felt he could hear the breaths of a thousand drowning victims. The ice cast shadows over the path and he had to squint before he could keep manoeuvring
his way through, twisting away from the sharp edges.

He slipped a few times before he made his way out. Looking back briefly, Pitu expected to see something like a shadow of darkness on the path he’d just left. He was sure he felt the presence of a malevolent entity within the huddled ice. And yet, he could see that there was nothing. The contorted columns of ice were still and unwavering.

Pitu called out to the women again. They were only ten paces away from each other now. The three women went rigid, their backs straightening, their shabby amautiit jostling what they carried in their pouches. He continued his way toward them, but their wailing had ceased. The oddness of the situation made him hesitate—the terror from his journey through the ice still making his stomach turn, his heart pound, and his skin prickle.

“Ai,” Pitu cautiously called out again. He was standing only two or three strides away now.

One of the women turned to look at him.

Pitu stepped back in instant horror, dropping his weapons in shock. It wasn’t a woman, he realized instantly. The stories he had been told as a child oriented him. He fell to his knees, clamping his mittened hands over his ears. He stood up from his position on his hands and knees, getting back to his feet. Though he felt woozy, he wanted to face the qallupilluit with dignity.

One of the qallupilluit, the one in the middle, seemed to be the leader. She growled at the others and addressed Pitu again. “Did you come to steal our babies?”

They didn’t wait for him to answer. Instead, all three leaped forward to attack him. Pitu suddenly remembered his weapons. The qallupilluit did not seem to have noticed that the harpoon was on the ground next to their flipper-feet. When they leaped, it was left in the open. Pitu dove for it while the three creatures were midair. He grasped it with a definite grip, readjusted it for aiming, and threw it with all his strength at the qallupilluq in the middle, the one who had spoken to him.

It seemed as though time had stopped as the harpoon sailed through the air. The qallupilluit had their backs to Pitu now, unaware of the harpoon flying toward them. Pitu stared at it, willing it toward his target.

Two of the creatures landed on their feet; one fell into a heap on the ice. The harpoon stood out stiffly from the back of its neck. There was a moment of surprised silence. With horror that mirrored Pitu’s, the qallupilluit watched as the life drained out of their kin. The two, aghast and now frightened, straightened from their crouching stances.

“Nanijauniaravit,” said one in a horrifying whisper. “You’ll be found.”

The two ran into the trail through the frozen
shards of ice that Pitu had just passed through. Pitu shivered, the words finding a way to penetrate his spine and crawl into his mind, momentarily paralyzing him there. He closed his eyes against tears that were beginning to well up. His blood was running through his veins in a terrified frenzy. He knew that this was something he had had to do, he had had no choice, but there were too many thoughts going through his mind. He had just encountered a creature of myth—he had just killed one.

A sudden thought slammed him back from his fear, though the thought was no less dreadful, perhaps more so. He made his way over toward the dead creature in front of him. Pitu warily touched the back of the qallupilluq’s amauti. Under his hand, there was no mistaking the solid curve of children in the pouch.

More sickness was forming in his stomach. Pitu didn’t want to see them, he didn’t want to see what had become of the children that were stolen by the creatures. With courage he did not think he possessed, Pitu opened the hood of the amauti, disturbed to see the two small children in the pouch.

One was a boy, his skin gone blue from asphyxiation and drowning. The little boy must have been three or four. He still wore the caribou snowsuit that his maternal guardian had made for him. The child was shrunken and frozen, dead.

The other child was a girl, slightly older than the boy, but she was not dead. Instead, she was transforming. The child shied away from him, from the light. Her eyes were almost normal, her hair was almost normal, but her skin was scaly in certain spots … Pitu could see that she was changing. She was becoming like the qallupilluq that had just attacked Pitu. The little girl cried, her voice still human, her mouth still unchanged by the awful transformation. She was still more human than she was monster.

Pitu didn’t know what to do. Should he reach in and help her? The little girl whimpered softly. Her mouth was forming words, but he couldn’t hear her gentle voice. “Hai?” he asked.

“Avani,” she mumbled infinitesimally louder. “Go away.”

“I can help you,” Pitu said, though he was not sure that was true. “You can come with me. I’m a shaman.”

“Avani!” she shouted, a bit of anger in her voice. “Go away!”

The little girl began to wail like the qallupilluqt had before he came along. Her eyes darkened, looking sinister.

Pitu stumbled away. He pulled the harpoon from the dead qallupilluq’s neck and grabbed his knife, which was lying a little ways off. He started walking away, passing the crack in the ice the creatures had been crying over. He glanced at the hole. Inside, there was only darkness, but he thought of the holes in the ice he went by sometimes, broken wide open and dangerous, chunks of ice and frozen seaweed floating at the surface. He couldn’t help but imagine his little brother and sister, standing at the edge of one of those holes and peering in, hoping to see a seal, and instead finding bony hands reaching out and grabbing hold of them, bringing them here only to die or become a monster.

He took one last glance at what he’d just left. The little girl had crawled from the amauti and was now walking into the terrible ice shards he’d come through. She was looking for the others. She cried out hesitantly. A wail called back in return. The little girl sprinted into the maze of ice, without a glance at the mess that Pitu had created.

Walking away from that little girl haunted him more than anything that had ever happened to him. He felt like a coward for abandoning her, even though the child had told him to leave.

Pitu was in the spirit world. That was about the only thing he knew.

And he was terrified.

Aviaq Johnston is an Inuit author from Igloolik, Nunavut. In 2014, Aviaq won first place in the Aboriginal Arts and Stories competition and a Governor General’s History Award for her short story “Tarnikuluk.” Those Who Run in the Sky is her debut novel.

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