

Valkeapää Ensnared the World

By John Gustavsen/Translation Troy Storfjell

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää considered himself a guest on this earth. He wanted people to take responsibility both for themselves and for their surroundings. Through art he invited us to life.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was a guest on this earth between 23 March, 1943, and 26 November, 2001. His long period of artistic production started with yoik at the end of the 1960s, and continued with writing, visual arts, music, photography and film. He was often termed a “multi-artist.”

He was born in Palojoensuu in Enontekiö commune, and his family—mother, father, sister and brother—herded reindeer. His parents could tell that he wasn't like other children; he didn't like the reindeer slaughter. In a picture from age three or four he appears to be very shy. A poem tells a little of who he was:

The earth sounded, echoed

Set out now, my child

Spread your wings out, fly

Discover your own intention, deliberate

Consider

(From *Nu guhkkín dat mii lahka/ Så nært det fjerne*, DAT 1994. Translated to Norwegian by Harald Gaski, Jon Toda log Kristina Utsi)

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää attended the teachers' college in Kemijärvi in Finnish Lapland. But he never worked as a teacher. When he was around 25 years old, he stepped out into art. It was primarily yoik that occupied him, but he also drew and wrote. And he was angry, angry because Sámi children weren't able to learn their mother tongue, and because the Nordic states occupied what he considered to be the land of the Sámi. This was the driving force behind his first book to come out, published in Finnish in 1971 as *Terveisiä Lapista* (in Norwegian as *Helsing frå Sameland*, Pax forlag, 1979, translated by Liv Hatle, and in English as *Greetings From Lapland: The Sami, Europe's Forgotten People*, Zed Press, 1983, translated by Beverley Wahl). The book was published "in youthful anger," and he tells us that "in my heart the bluethroat twittered, but at times a cold wind blew there."

Valkeapää ("the bright head") traveled long paths leading to his reception of the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1991 for his poetry and photography collection *Beaivvi, áhčážán* (*Solen, min far* in Norwegian, and *The Sun, My Father* in English). This was a high point of his life, leading to important appearances and performances. Many projects were planned or projected, but then the dramatic happened. "Áilohaš," as his friends called him, was the victim of an automobile accident in 1996, not far from his home in Beattet/ Pättikä, forty kilometers west of Karesuando. For a long time he hovered between life and death, but eventually he recovered, and continued ...

His response was the book *Jorda, min mor* (The Earth, My Mother, DAT forlag 2006), translated to Norwegian by his trusted friend Harald Gaski. Valkeapää had risen to a new achievement, clearly injured by the accident, but after having completed the work *Eanni, eannážan*, which came out in 2001, the fatal occurred. On a November evening in 2001 he lay down to rest at a friend's in Helsinki. He never woke up; his heart gave out.

Between *The Sun, My Father* and *Eanni, eannážan* lies a long journey. While the sun is the masculine symbol, the energy that streams from outer space, the mother is that which receives, creates life and protects. Nils-Aslak Valkeapää lived for quite a while with his mother, during her final years in Skibotn, and later when he visited her at the nursing home in Lyngen. He even published a book of her drawings.

The two large books must have been planned for a long time. In Copenhagen he once told about why he traveled so much: it was in order to meet other Indigenous people and dive into their knowledges and worlds. We should see these two poetry and photography books in connection with the poetic cycle *Ruoktu váimmus* (1985; *Vindens veier* 1990; *Trekways of the Wind* 1994). *The Sun, My Father* came out in Sámi in 1988, and its nomination for the Nordic Prize led to translation three years later by Harald Gaski, Jon Todal and Kristina Utsi. The first book is illustrated with pictures from Sámiland, while the later one also contains photos of Indigenous peoples from many areas. His colorful paintings are an abstract narrative with clear symbols of birth and death, earth and people. Some

of the photographs by Roald Amundsen, among others, demonstrate the strong connections along the arctic circle and between Indigenous peoples.

The journeys in Valkeapää's life were many, and this helps to shape the texts. A requirement for being able to manage something like that is that one has a place to come back home to. The author who couldn't bring himself to take the life of a reindeer had to find another profession for himself. His life was characterized by journeys to see, think and understand. The tundra's son, born in the mountains, was eventually drawn to the sea, towards the coast where his mother had moved as a child, to Uløya. He eventually came to feel comfortably at home in Skibotn. His poetry is characterized by the year's seasonal changes, by the cycle of light and darkness. What is he doing?

I wander

along the mind's valleys

on the high mountain

follow the hollows

and clefts

The poems told us about the international artist who visited Indigenous friends across much of the earth. In his books we see his drawings, paintings and photographs. He often visited museums in order to find traces of the Sámi past, but here he also bumped into other people's ways of life.

He used all his senses, both when traveling and when meeting others, and he quite intentionally enjoyed sights, sounds, smells and movements. When he returned home to his small cottage in the mountains, he didn't just sit inside, but went out to look after the reindeer and to be together with his family. And as part of his "extended family" he included the birds, with whom he had heart-to-heart conversations. This is what he brought into his art, perhaps most of all in his poems. The words wander like reindeer on the tundra.

The human being,

a shadow across the heavens

night's

dark side

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was always willing to take new steps. When Nils Gaup began work on the film *Ofelaš (The Pathfinder)*, Valkeapää had a role in it as the leader of the *siida*, the Sámi village. But he also composed the film's musical score, and through that the expanded space within us as we watch it.

The accident robbed Nils-Aslak Valkeapää of his ability to yoik, something he expressed real sorrow over in a conversation at his home in Skibotn. But now it was almost as if he yoiked forth the pictures on the screen with a wide landscape of poetry: words that float on the water, or are formed as mountains, formations and birds.

As he approached the year 2000 he was in the process of fulfilling the dream of having his own home on the boundary between sea and land. He was occupied with what he referred to as “Nordic space.” His house would receive the light, the whispering of the sea, the wind’s sighing and the body’s impulses. He gave it the name *Lásságámmi*, or *Svaberggammen* (lit. “the turf hut on the smooth, sloping shore rock”). If you visit the area in Skibotn, you will see some of the thought behind it. The house was built for soul and body, with a sauna in the basement, of course. From here he and guests could quickly take a dip in the fjord.

Valkeapää could see, and he had something to tell us. But much was difficult for him to express. “Pain’s Text” tells us something of cultures in collision:

here

also here

here also

money

machines

foreign ways of thinking

The rebel Nils-Aslak Valkeapää is seldom highlighted. He suspected civilization, technology, science, progress; but was he a contrary reactionary? He was undoubtedly subject to the pressures of vanity from the many who, as his fame

began to grow, wanted to colonize him. He often chose, therefore, to escape by playing with words as birds and vehicles. They could take him there where he most wanted to go:

Ivgu

Ivgovuotna

Ivgoráss'

Ivgobahta

...

galgu

Gálgojávri

Words, light as birds, would weigh heavily, and not let themselves be easily captured. Here was a linguistic opposition to the empty speech often referred to as scholarly knowledge. Here are simple pictures with strong colors, with the light of water and the taste of blood.

Or an ironic, rebellious warning to “Learned Wise Good Fine Knowledgeable Scholars:”

PEOPLE

litter

mess up

make filthy

tear down

destroy

burn

pollute

desecrate

our

HOLY PLACES

The author was able to move into his home the same year that he received Norwegian citizenship and died. Both *Lásságámmi* and the art that survived him had a final goal:

for the pleasure of the next guest

a mild breeze

in the mind

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