

more reverent stance to take before nature. He was a writer moving “toward a prose that conveys experience as accurately—and as literally—as possible, without the intrusion of metaphor” (208). Johnson’s study raises by implication difficult questions about the very possibility of “nature writing.” The translation of nature into language is an act of abstraction and distillation, always carrying the mark of human culture. We can find this struggle in some of our best contemporary nature writers—Gary Snyder and Mary Oliver provide good examples. *Passions for Nature* thus highlights a difficult question for environmental criticism: can one write nature without ultimately displacing it?

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***Shopping for Porcupine: A Life in Arctic Alaska.* By Seth Kantner. Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2008. 256 pp. Cloth \$28.00. Paper \$18.00.**

The opening scene of this earthy book finds the author, now in his forties, at the decaying sod igloo of a childhood neighbor. He is reminiscing about simpler times, and about the changes wrought in his home land as rugged subsistence has given way to recreational hunting. “Although I’m not nearly an elder,” he writes, “sometimes it’s tough, watching all these young people and newcomers rush past with their fast and fancy equipment, with little room on board for knowledge or respect for those by-hand times so recently passed.” We are familiar with this modern plot: the relentless advance of industrial civilization and the wistful loss of innocence. But where will the pursuit of “such heaped and flip-pant wealth” lead us? (8).

Shopping for Porcupine is the nonfiction follow-up to Kantner’s acclaimed novel *Ordinary Wolves*, also set in northern Alaska. Twenty-one autobiographical essays (eleven of them previously published) offer an episodic account of growing up on the Arctic tundra. The text is amply illustrated with color photos, many by the author,

and two area maps and an Iñupiaq glossary also help situate this life in space and time.

Kantner's parents both grew up in Ohio, but met and married in Alaska. In 1964 they joined a small group of friends intent on homesteading in the Kobuk River valley, an isolated refuge above the Arctic Circle. Howard had come to admire the Iñupiaq, having overwintered with a lone elderly couple still living off the land. He and Erna wanted to practice "the old-life ways," and even their modern Iñupiaq friends marvel that the Kantners "lived like Eskimos!" (24).

The first half of the book covers the author's childhood and adolescence, narrated in a direct style that reflects his normative experience of wilderness. The second half explores his protracted coming-of-age, as he struggles to make sense of this unique background and to find his own way in the world. The title essay appears midway through *Shopping for Porcupine*, fusing these complementary parts into an organic unity, whole but unfinished; it is a taut reflection on friendship, subsistence, and technology. "I feel at home and yet uneasy, too," Kantner confesses, after dispatching and dressing a porcupine. "Forces are out there and coming. Powerful things like pavement, and strip mines," and the shiny new powerboat that carried him on this hunt (100). He is justifiably perplexed by the myriad paths of modernity, and his lean prose points in the right direction.

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***The Question of Animal Culture*. Edited by Kevin N. Laland and Bennett G. Galef. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009. 360 pp. Cloth \$49.95.**

The idea of nonhuman animal cultures has gained strength and support in recent years, culminating, as editors Kevin N. Laland and Bennett G. Galef put it, in "the recent spate of articles in prominent scientific journals, newspapers, and news magazines that argue that differences in the behavioral repertoires of animals living in different