

## Conjuring Life From a Stone

In Nunavut's farthest village, a humble artist carves out his vision of the Arctic – and the world beats a path to his door.

One winter, camped out in an igloo with his father, seven-year-old Looty Pijamini went outside and carved two rabbits out of snow. The rabbits looked so real that the sled dogs broke loose from their chains, pounced on them, then rushed into the igloo and caused mayhem. Pijamini's father, also a carver, was angry. He told his son never to do that again. Pijamini hasn't. Instead, working in stone and other media, he's etched out a reputation as one of the world's foremost Inuit artists. Now 55, his works, both realistic and imaginative, sell throughout North America, Europe and beyond. Yet despite his success, he still marvels at the hands he was given, and feels guilty when he isn't using them.

Today, in a workshop adjacent to his house in Grise Fiord, Nunavut's northernmost village, Pijamini's hands are at work on a narwhal tusk. His stubby, leathery fingers stroke life into the receptive ivory. He's wearing a mask and an apron, and his curly dark hair is covered with dust. The smell in the workshop is a bit like a dentist's office. CBC radio chatters and sings in the background. Pijamini is intent on his task, meticulously shaving off a tiny edge, brushing the ivory, and washing it to ensure a clean surface. It's clear he loves his work – though, he says, "sometimes it's hard to get myself over to the workshop in

the morning. It's easy for me not to work. I have no boss."

He's too modest. Most days, he puts in 10 hours at his workbench. Long days have always been part of his life. Born in an igloo while his family was travelling by dog-team between Pangnirtung and Clyde River on Baffin Island, he grew up primarily on the land. In 1961, his parents settled in Grise Fiord, where his father had been asked to continue his service as an RCMP special constable. Life there was challenging. Grise Fiord had only been established eight years earlier, when the Canadian government, in an effort to shore up High Arctic sovereignty, peopled the town with Inuit taken

"I never intended to become a carver. People just kept asking me to carve something for them."

from Port Harrison in Northern Quebec and Pond Inlet in Nunavut. For these people, later dubbed the "High Arctic exiles," those early years in the village were ones of hunger, cold and darkness. As a young boy new to Grise Fiord, Pijamini says, "The village seemed huge." Sixty people lived there then, and he thought it very strange that he didn't know them all. CONTINUED ...

Looty Pijamini's workshop is simple, but his art can fetch five figures and is collected far and wide.

