

Stories & Songs

Islands of Decolonial Love

by Leanne Simpson

ARP BOOKS • WINNIPEG

*the rose that won't leave stares at me, reminding me of tattoos
and trails of inflective wounds that can't ever be repaired.*

i leave with the slip and the car keys.

*i can't remember how he got rid of the rose, but he did. then
after the baby and before the move, he embedded a stainless
steel disk into the hardwood floor to mark the spot where love
took its first breath.*

i hand the slip to the woman at the post office and she finds
the letter. inside the rectangular brown envelope regulated
words file by. i read the plastic card with status indian printed
beside my name, and the word slut is released, corroding my
veins, erasing my lungs, settling in a repeated singing outside
my ear drum.

he can't hear that singing either. even if he holds me flat to his ear.

lost in a world where he was
always the only one

i did not want to drive onto the rez in a brand new white
volvo turbo 680 or whatever the fuck it was called.

"why don't we drive in my truck, i'll submit the travel claim, it'll
be easier."

"just get in, it's going to be great, we'll stop for breakfast on the
way, this car has heated leather seats."

enthusiasm, like romance made me suspicious.

"your car's going to get dirty. the roads are rough. let me drive."

he explained the benefits of the heated leather seats.

"are you sure? i don't mind driving."

he retorted with the safety manifesto of volvo, and then with a
firm "get in."

i slunk low into my heated leather seat in the rich, white car, clutching my tobacco, feeling the full impact of my betrayal, and knowing that technically things could still go either way, they were definitely heading in the wrong direction. i wondered if ira was a good guy, if i was just being judgmental and overly critical. i wondered how i could tell.

we drove out of thunder bay. it seemed to take forever to get to the terry fox monument and then to the turnoff for sibley. i smirked as we glided past the white vinyl-sided motel with the green trim by the turnoff, remembering someone else's story of a drunken three-way that happened in one of the rooms. it happened the third week in july with two co-workers. they got up the next morning, had breakfast together across the highway and then worked the rest of the summer like it had never happened, like the only witnesses were black velvet oil paintings, the smell of stale cigarette smoke and cable from alberta.

ira kept talking, about university politics, about maps, about quitting smoking. as we turned north at nipigon, past red rock first nation on lake helen, he told me his wife was giving him weekly workshops on how things in the house worked, like the bills and the washing machine, in case anything ever happened to her. i looked out the window, watching the hardness of those rock faces and imagining that serpent breaking the surface of the lake like an orca breaches for the tourists in vancouver. he explained his theory that white people had a plastic arrow tacked onto a piece of cardboard that they flicked to see which group of people they were going to screw over next, an arrow like you would flick to see how many spaces to move in a board game. according to him, jews and indians were on the board, and we never got to touch the arrow.

"those that never get to touch the arrow have to stick together, because you never know when your turn is coming," he explained.

i cringed every time he said "indian."

we continued past stands of black spruce, jack pine, abandoned snowmobiles and rusted trikes in front yards. i rolled down the window wondering what was going to happen when we got there. i imagined ideas falling out of my head into the swath of rubble between the highway and the rock face. ira continued talking, about his kids, who were my age, his wife and her garden, and about why i needed to go to grad school. i didn't tell him i wasn't smart.

the reserve we were going to is butted up against the trans-canada with cnr tracks dissecting it as well. we turned off the highway onto a dirt road in the immaculate white volvo 640 turbo with heated leather seats, my eyes barely over the dashboard, counting the four houses from the corner to locate the unmarked treatment centre, which was a regular empty inac house. i made a quick exit out of the car, thinking that maybe people wouldn't necessarily match me to the car if i put some clean distance between it and myself. the elders had told us to meet them there, and when we arrived, they were already gathering in the living room in a circle.

an old woman wearing a blue skirt, a plaid shirt, rubber boots with wool socks and a kerchief tied around her chin let us in. she told us to sit down on two aqua-blue folding chairs placed in the circle, and we did. everyone else sat on couches and uneven easy boys of varying shades of beige, blue and green. the linoleum floor was giving up, but there were curtains and flattened cardboard boxes for doormats. they started. they smudged, they prayed, they sang. they introduced themselves, and asked us to introduce ourselves. we did. i offered them my tobacco, apologetically. i lied and told them my grandmother told me to offer it to them. the only time my grandmother touched tobacco was when she was mixing it with weed. i was sure both my grandmother and my family would step up and support my lie at least existentially. i figured it wasn't much to ask, and more importantly it would be difficult for them to screw it up.

old lady levi then asked ira to speak and tell them about the project.

he lit a cigarette and he told them three things. first, that the band council had asked us to help the elders document all the ways they related to the land in the past and in contemporary times. second, that throughout the project, the elders would be in charge. they would make all of the decisions because as far as he was concerned, they were the experts, and third that the final document could be whatever they wanted.

then he sat down.

old lady levi stood up, thanked us and asked us to leave. she opened the living room door, watched us as we passed through it, and then told us to wait outside until she reappeared.

we did. for probably two hours.

we heard a lot of talking. some praying. some singing. some more talking.

ira smoked. i drank watery maxwell house out of a styrofoam cup, and then bit teeth marks all around the top edge, wondering what was going to happen to me when i hit the end of the prozac prescription no one was monitoring.

then we heard old lady levi's footsteps. she paused on the other side of the door. i imagined her hand on the handle, hesitating and then opening it.

we stood up.

she looked through us and said, "come back next month, maybe a monday next time. monday is better." she went back into the room and shut the door.

ira lit another cigarette, did up his coat, and walked outside, remotely starting the car on the way. it was nearly four, and the sun was sinking below the stand of black spruce out my window. we retraced our morning's steps back to thunder bay. a month later, this time on a monday, we went back, and we kept going back for two years, sometimes moving the meeting twice a month.

i redrew the maps those old ones kept tucked away in their bones.

i took these notes:

how to pluck the feathers off a goose

how to roast a duck on an open fire

how to block the cnr lines

how to live as if it mattered

when my head couldn't hold any more stories, gilbert brought the school bus around after he'd dropped the kids in town. all twenty elders piled in with ira and i, as they drove us down logging roads to the community's trap line.

remember:

to feel joy, you first have to escape.

there's an old nishnaabe story, from the beginning of time, where seven grandparents who live in the sky world take a young child from his parents and raise him in the ways that the earth's people have forgotten. they teach him stories, songs and ceremonies and eventually he is sent back to earth to share these ways with his people. i never really liked that story, because my heart gets broken when they take the boy away from his parents, and i only ever listen to the rest in a nervous holding pattern, lost in how lonely that boy must have felt, lost in a world where he was always the only one.