

by: David Clink • for your 2017 Aurora Award consideration (Poem/Song category)

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Surviving a Canadian Poem

*For the editors of the "The Best Canadian Poetry in English" anthology series,
and, after misreading "Surviving a Canadian Prison" in the LRC*

I

To survive a Canadian poem,
you must first find the love of hockey again
that was nearly frozen out of your fingers
when you watered that outdoor ice sheet nightly.

Surviving it is to survive Canadian history
without (and sometimes with) the history lesson.
It is a witness to a clarity we cannot approach, just observe—
an ontology of prairie grasses, a catalogue of lakes,
the interpretive dance of wheat fields,
ponds askew with throat-singing amphibians.

It takes us everywhere and nowhere.
It tells us something we don't know about ourselves.
It gives us the taste of solitudes.

II

A Canadian poem retains the memory
of what brought it here,
the risk of totem poles, the excitement of inuksuks,
the doomed chinook, the surprise of Kurelek bears
sledding down snow-covered hills on their backs,
for they have become part of us,

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that part we thought was lost in infancy,
gone absent in that darkened room where we watched
an NFB film of our primitive morphologies,
pausing on the vestigial tail
we can't quite remember
but whose absence we have felt.

A Canadian poem yearns to take us back
to the sleepy stereotype of the mud hut
we crawled out of, the village where
generations of trappers carved out a life,
where fishermen plucked anecdotes
out of startled lakes, the logging trails
where sawyers cut down trees till their arms fell numb,
where our ancestors died and at once were remembered
then forgotten,
and always the inadequacy of words.

A Canadian poem can take us to another place
where *The Collected Poems of Irving Layton*
are reproduced by a hundred beavers slapping their
giant tails against a hundred typewriters.

And if the afterlife *is* the last image caught by the eye—
close the eyes; place two-dollar coins on them.

III

In surviving a Canadian poem
we remember catching ourselves gazing at mountains
and being pulled along towards an inevitable idea, that,

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in the forward movement of our luminous lives
we have found something or nothing,
in the mythologies of back roads,
in the waterfall that has no beginning or end
(just an artifice, a provenance, a burden),
in the challenge of separating the sound
of loons, woodpeckers, frogs, crickets,

and in the feeling we can't shake—
that in this struggle to love and be loved
we have been walking down to a cottage lake
since the time glaciers came and went,
how we marvelled at the height of the ice
and watched it recede, scooping out the places we settled,
hollowing us out till we needed sun to breathe,
wind to grant us voice,
the bones of our forebears rattling in dry winds,
against a warmer future.

IV

To survive a Canadian poem is to reach inside
the tombstoned earth
and discover that plot where all the poets are buried
and find a voice, a fear, a war, a wonder, death and peace,
this symbolic language of worms,
extended metaphor of sun and rain,
this dialogue of stem and root system,
charcoal sketch, these imperfections!
And call it a gift, a life.

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When you have survived
you have survived yourself,
for the poem you found is a guest cabin
where you can visit and stay again and again, and you can invite
others to stay
long after you're gone,
and it has a kitchen where people converge
because it's raining creative nonfiction outside,
and the company it keeps:
a community of cut flowers;
a mountain you climbed and found
an idea for God that was your own;
deciphered clues, unanswered questions,
the news of the day in radishes, streetcars born
out of some mechanical sea, ancient, crepuscular,
the atrocities committed by our ancestors, ourselves.

And the guests can feel what you have felt,
be it your reluctance or joy,
the intensity you sense even in the softest moments,
the intricacies of a life
you make and unmake each day.