

A History of My Brief Body

Billy-Ray Belcourt

UQP

PREFACE

A Letter to Nôhkom

This isn't a book about you, nôhkom. A book about you, a book in which you appear uncomplicatedly in a world of your own making, would be an anti-nation undertaking. Canada is in the way of that book. To write that book I would need to write crookedly and while on the run. I would need to write my way out of a map and onto the land. For now, you move in and out of my books as though wind in a photograph. I swear no one will mistake you for a deflated balloon hanging from my fist. Here, and in my poetry, you're always looking up at the sky, longing for the future. In order to remember you as a practitioner of the utopian, I need to honour the intimacies of the unwritten. This book, then, is as much an ode to you as it is to the world-to-come. In the world-to-come, your voice reminds those in your orbit that we can stop running, that we've already stopped running.

Often I remember that you likewise have been denied the relief and pleasure of stillness. When I do, my heart breaks. When it does, I gather the shards into the shape of a country, then I close my eyes and swallow.



Courtney, my oldest sister, and I have a running joke about how you call her only when you're searching for me, because for whatever reason you can't find me between the hundreds or thousands of kilometres that make the world too wide for you to be beside me anymore. In the summer of 2016, for example, I travelled to Honolulu for the gathering of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. Before I boarded the plane you said this to me over the phone: "Don't forget to call me, because I'll go crazy if I don't hear from you."

What a sentence! Built into the mechanics of love is the possibility of mismanagement, for we can never adequately anticipate how our relation to a love object might shift or morph over time. Love has a tendency to shatter; it is prone to weakening and to running amok without notice. Perhaps, ironically, this is how it anchors us to a world, how it makes us want to give everything to the project of living well with others. Without love or the object into which we hoard parts of ourselves, we might go "crazy," lose our bearings. Although distance and time have pried open a barely translatable gap between you and me, we still find something worth tending to in the history of us that is unavailable elsewhere.

You love to tell the story about how when Jesse, my twin brother, and I were babies, you had to sit me in a jumper and him in a saucer to feed us concurrently. You would shovel a bit of oatmeal into my mouth then turn to Jesse, you inform us, smirking. You fill the room with laughter each time you describe and re-enact how impatiently I would wait for my helping. Begging, high energy—you had to pick up the pace to appease me. I'm floored, not only by your ability to call up a decades-old memory, but also and more acutely by the joy that having had such an experience brings you.

Even in my earliest memories, I've always intuited your presence as a capacious one. I was a "kokum's boy," so to speak. You took me everywhere—albeit not to the bingo hall! You showed me a level of unconditional love that I rarely find at all nowadays. You were and are at the core of an extended family unit, balancing, back then, the fine line of encounter between my mom and my dad, your relatives and his. As kids, as you know all too well, Jesse and I rarely spent the night anywhere but our little house in the bush. Yes, we often made ambitious plans to do otherwise, but you always answered our late-night phone calls spurred by a sudden bout of sickness and then drove anywhere between fifteen and thirty minutes to fetch us. Truth be told, we were seldom ill; we simply wanted to be where you were.

It seems now that this flow of emotion has inverted as I've grown up. Today, I sometimes forget to call when

I said I would, or I habitually wait for your number to flash across my phone. This monumental change is a disorienting fact of adult life—we stretch outside the collective skin of the family. But back then your love incubated a refuge, one I can always return to if need be.

To speak of the possibility of losing me because I'm not near you might also point to the ways that we inhabit imperilled bodies in a shrinking world in which we don't remember how to coexist without stymying collective flourishing. It's as though you're saying, à la Warsan Shire, that I'm "terrifying and strange and beautiful, someone not everyone knows how to love."¹ It's as though you're warning me that your house might be the only sanctuary for NDN boys who love at the speed of utopia.

Nôhkom, I'm not safe. Canada is still in the business of gunning down NDNs. What's more, state violence commonly manifests as a short-circuited life, one marked by illness, sadness, and other negative affects by which we become ruled until what remains of a body is a ghoulish trace. Despite the stories of progress and equality at the core of Canada's national identity, a long tradition of brutality and negligence is what constitutes kinship for the citizens of a nation sat atop the lands of older, more storied ones. I can't promise I won't become snared in someone's lethal mythology of race. What I can do is love as though it will rupture the singularity of Canadian

cruelty (irrespective of whether this is a sociological possibility). Herein lies my poetic truth.

Love, then, isn't remotely about what we might lose when it inevitably dissipates. How unworkable love would be were we to subject it to a cost-benefit analysis! In the world of the statistical it doesn't survive and is stripped of its magic; love dwells somewhere less rhythmized by anticipation, less mediated by prediction and calculation, all of which fools us into fighting to preserve a sovereignty that doesn't exist. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz writes: "To accept the way in which one is lost is to be also found and not found."² What has stayed constant between us is this cycle of losing and finding, this unending transference of vitality, without which we might feel directionless. Love of this sort, however, isn't about making a roadmap to an other who then becomes your compass. It is a proposition to nest in the unrepayable and ever-mounting debt of care that stands in opposition to the careless and transactional practices of state power that mire the lives of NDNs and other minoritized populations. Having inherited your philosophy of love, which is also a theory of freedom, *nôhkom*, I can write myself into a narrative of joy that troubles the horrid fiction of race that stalks me as it does you and our kin.

It's likely that you might feel confused at times by my style of writing, its dexterity, its refusal of easiness, but I

know that you'll sense the affection bubbling up inside each word. That affection is joy, and it started with you. Now, I see it everywhere.

kisahkihiti,
Bill, Edmonton, AB

