



symbols of infinity

story and photos by anik see

YOU KNOW THE STEREOTYPES OF THE NORTH: THE MISFITS, THE PEOPLE WHO LIKE BEING ISOLATED, THE HARDY ONES. THE INHOSPITABLE LANDSCAPE. BUT A SUMMER MEANDER AROUND NWT'S GREAT SLAVE LAKE REVEALS AN IMMENSE LANDSCAPE, HAUNTED BY MYTHS, AND BRIMMING WITH INEXPLICABLE NATURAL WONDERS. THEN THERE'S THE PEOPLE...

YELLOWKNIFE IS SITTING on a gold mine. And I don't mean that metaphorically. A vein (and a shaft to get to it) runs right under it.

I'm leaning in the doorway of the place where I'm staying and the ground gives a short, sharp roll, like an aftershock.

"Did you feel that?" I ask the guy behind me.

He looks up and asks, "what?"

"Like an earthquake," I say.

"Oh," he says. "That's them blasting." And he sighs like he's had to explain it to a million people. Which he probably has. His manner reminds me of the signs in southeast Asian hotels for-bidding durian fruit in the lobby and rooms. I don't know why. Maybe something to do with feeling like you have to apologize for a completely normal part of your life to someone who exists in a completely separate loop; someone who can try to understand, but may never will.

IT'S A WEDNESDAY NIGHT in the middle of August and Bryan and I are at the Black Knight. When we walked in, his face fell and he looked sideways at me. Apologized for how quiet the place

was. Later, he does the same at the Gold Range, the most suitably notorious bar in town. He's never seen it so low-key. He says this as someone lurches past, pushing Bryan into me, someone who takes his half-empty/half-full beer bottle to the other side of the bar and smashes it on the stage where a local AC/DC cover band keeps playing. Laconically.

A woman walks in and announces that her car was broken into. All conversation stops; you can hear the needle being dragged across the record Yellowknife likes to play for tourists. People turn to me. This never happens in Yellowknife, they say, over and over again, I have never heard of this happening and I've lived here my whole life.

The woman whose car was broken into is standing at the bar, already halfway through a bottle of Kokanee, laughing.

"Oh, they didn't take anything," she says. "They just smashed the little triangle window in the back and went through all my stuff – CDs, everything – but they left it all alone." The people in

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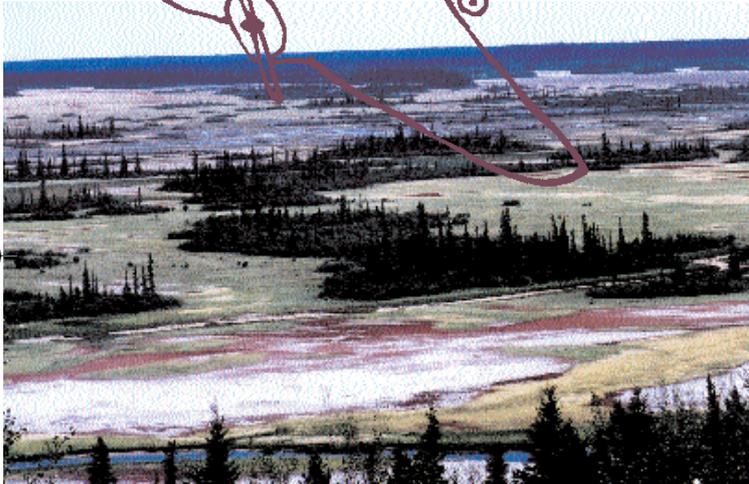
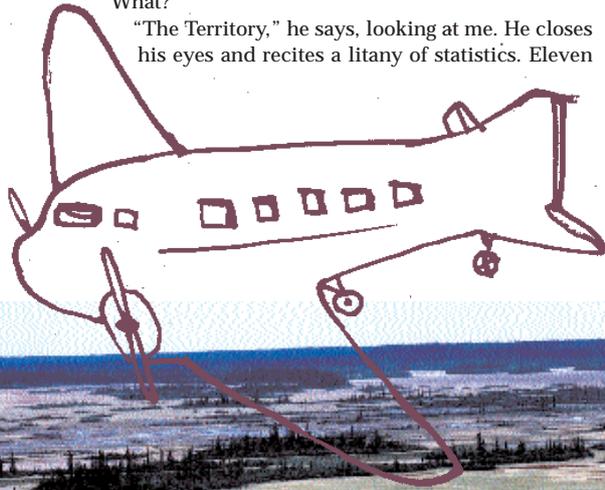
the bar who know what I am give me a satisfied look, like this is proof it never happens. Insert a journalist and places are suddenly changed against their will. They're never the way they always are when someone with a pen and a blank notebook shows up and don't put that in your story, they always say. It's not real.

Outside the bar, green swashes of light streak overhead and there's a band of daylight rimming the horizon. It's 2 am. Difficult for me to tell if it's from the sunset or encroaching dawn.

A Dogrib man walking down the street stops in front of me. "Hey," he says, poking me in the shoulder, "you're other."

"What?"

"The Territory," he says, looking at me. He closes his eyes and recites a litany of statistics. Eleven



percent Métis, 12 percent Dene, seven percent Dogrib, 81 percent other. I laugh. We shake hands and he and Bryan and I walk down the rest of the block together, not saying anything. Looking up at the sky, not trying to predict where the lights will veer in the next second, or the one after that.



"... it was merely (Franklin's) weird death that brought us to the Arctic for good, first in the form of search parties, and then as traders, missionaries, police, resettlement administrators, our purpose long and sharp and spiralled like a narwhal horn..."

WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN, THE RIFLES

I READ VOLLMANN before I came here. Well, first I read MacKenzie's journals, and about Franklin's interior voyages, and then I read Vollmann, an itinerant, slightly crazed and avant-garde American writer who has spent a lot of time in the Canadian north – he even lost his eyebrows up here, and how many peo-

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ple can say that about a place?

I read Vollmann because I didn't want the stereotypes of the north to take over, and if you're going to be navigating an arena that has been over-generalized, you need to find out if Vollmann has written about that arena and if he has, you need to read him. Because when he writes about a place, he will show you a different angle, even if he found the pre-existing stereotypes and generalizations to be true. With Vollmann, you rotate through infinite loops of individual story – stories without beginning or end, like you just dropped in on the monologue of someone's life and have to leave before it's over. He deconstructs the stereotype so that the stereotype dissolves, becomes unimportant. Becomes insulting. As it should.

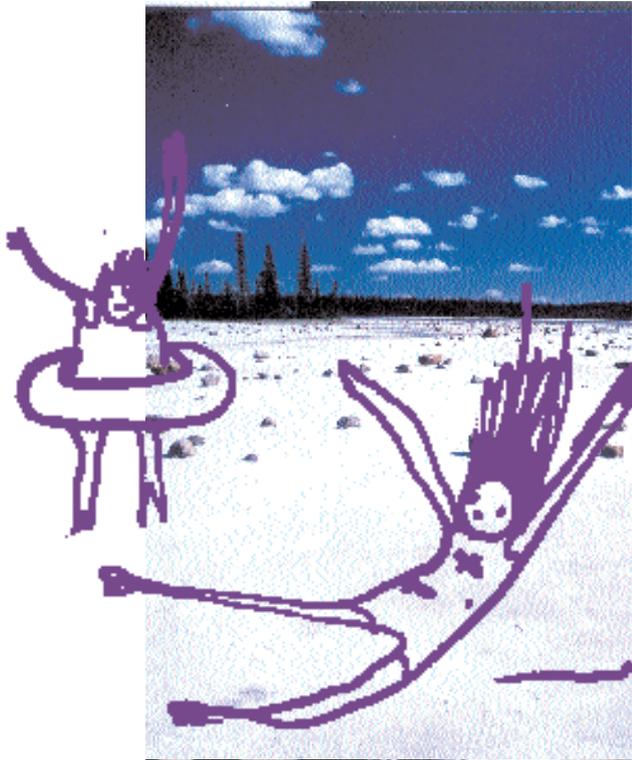
You know the stereotypes of the North: the igloos and dogsleds and tipis and polar bears and blahblahblah. The misfits, the people who like being isolated, people who've never aspired to what southern, urban Canada considers necessities, people who think nothing of what we'd now call a lifestyle with pioneering tendencies (and by that you know we mean chopping wood for heat, shooting an animal so that you can actually use it). It's a stereotype so rooted in the North's culture that Yellowstone's tourist brochure devotes five pages to innocently mar-

keting this phenomenon.

I used to know a reformed heroin addict who would shoot up once a year to remind herself why she quit. "The larger the searchlight the larger the circumference of the unknown," she used to say. I think of her every time I meet someone who says I came up here on a one-year contract 20 years ago.

AT THE YELLOWKNIFE airport, waiting for a flight across the lake to Hay River, I'm introduced to the Speaker of the Territorial House. He's on his way to the Cook Islands to deliver a paper on conflict of interest. He's keen to go and gives me an endearing speech that takes pendulous swings between the necessity of his being there and his surprise at being asked. We talk a bit about the NWT and how politics have changed since the formation of Nunavut. He hasn't reached any grand conclusions, he says. Some things are easier, less complicated now, but some are harder. There's less money, but fewer people and agencies to allocate it to. The one thing he thinks about a lot, he says, is if the physical boundaries of the Northwest Territories keep changing, how will that affect its identity? Will it mean loss, or just a shift? He tilts his head and thinks about it some more.

His cellphone rings. "Probably the Prime Minister," he says, winking at me from under his DQ ballcap. He talks on the phone



for a bit, then hangs up and tells me how he bungled his first meeting with Tony Blair. Laughing. On the way to the departure gate, we see the Premier, unescorted, standing in the middle of the crowd – where everyone knows everyone and some people have come here just to see who's getting off the plane – checking messages on his cell phone.



THERE WAS A GUY who came up to Hay River from the States not too long ago. He slipped sideways into its small population and spent the winter with his ear cocked to an abandoned early

warning system dish perched on the shore of Great Slave Lake. He was listening for sounds from space, looking for proof of extra-terrestrial intelligence. He ran out of money. He went back home.

Hay River's claim to fame – as though in competition for a bizarre history (defenestration in Prague, for example) – is detonation:

- 1819 – the Northwest Company accidentally blows up its entire supply of gunpowder.
- Early 1970s – first a small building, then Hay River's courthouse are blown up deliberately with sticks of dynamite. Still unsolved.
- Today – rumours of draft dodgers, Wounded Knee Indians and arms caches in the area still circulate. No proof ever willingly uncovered.

A friend of mine wants me to hate Hay River. An ex-girlfriend of his who really did a number on him was from there and when I told him I was going, he giggled and said, “if I give you her old address, will you throw tomatoes at her house?”

Another friend who worked up at a fish camp on an island in Great Slave Lake for four years wants me to love it. “Everyone's a character,” he says, “everyone's got a story.” For him, Hay River was an oasis of haze – defined relatively as a narrow strip of civilization, escape from the camp spent almost exclusively at an “authentic” bar called The Zoo. Don't get me wrong. He liked both places – the camp and The Zoo. He existed in both, just separately. “If you go to the bar,” he tells me, “try and go with someone. A woman alone will not come out of there unscarred.”

Truth is, I can't be anything but nostalgic about Hay River. It starts with the flight over, on an old DC-3 prop nicknamed the Gooney Bird, each and every one of its 27 seats full, the plane making so much noise you're reminded of what flying actually means. It ends with an evening on the southern shore of Great Slave Lake, still littered with driftwood (and I mean kilometres and kilometres of whole fallen trees here) from when the ice broke up a couple of months ago.

A woman I meet traipsing over logs, an astonishing number of them chewed to a hourglass shape by beavers, says it's too bad, they'll have to wait till next year to see if they'll have a beach again, to see if the logs get carried away by the wind and ice, the same things that put them there. In the distance, a couple of 10-year-old girls have lit a campfire. The heat from it is rising in shimmery waves and they run around near it – over the logs, into the water, back to the fire – in their bathing suits, with sandy, tanned limbs. Nothing but the sound of small waves washing up on shore, the occasional crack from the fire, the twins laughing a few hundred metres away. I sit on a log and look out at the lake, all sky and water in front and low, pined and poplared shoreline behind me, and all I want is my childhood back. Summers on Georgian Bay, when there was nothing like video to distract us from being real.

The woman who invited me to the fishfry runs a camp. Some tipis, a walltent, old Bombadiers to take the kids out on the ice in winter. Faye grew up on the mighty Mackenzie, moving up and down the river by dogsled or moosehide canoe whenever her father, a patrolman for the parks, needed to be somewhere else. Elders, ones who are old enough, anyway, tell stories of life on the Mackenzie during the influenza epidemic in the 1920s. You'd see a canoe floating downriver, they say, everyone inside them dead. That's how quick it got to you. But Faye is too young to have that story to tell.

The fish is good. So is the bannock. “Mársi Cho.” That's Slavey for thank you.

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Faye smiles and nods. She says, "Safe travels wherever you go, hey?"



RUNNING ALONG THE EDGE of high cirrus cloud on the way to Fort Smith, thin, spindly spruce poke out of a 360-degree horizon of low pine, top-heavy, like probes. Again and again, a hypnotic sight from the car I'm in.

A few hours later, half an hour before Fort Smith, 20 dusty minutes off the highway, you come to the edge of an escarpment. The pines and poplar fall away and there is a vast expanse of plain as far as the eye can see. It's a salt plain, though that's not entirely evident. Three hundred and seventy kilometres long, 150 kilometres wide and one of the many anomalies of Wood Buffalo National Park that render it a World Heritage site. I've always liked the idea of trying to force mutation into a set of prerequisites that will qualify it as a mutation again. It's like watching sand fall through an hourglass: wide and free, then a brief, breath-taking moment of grains corralled into a narrow opening before they fall free again, into the bottom half of the glass.

A brief explanation of what this is. Ground water and precipitation mix and the salt that gets picked up gets pushed out when it meets the granite shield – in this case, the escarpment. From above, the plain is an embroidery of isolated pockets, paint-by-number. Salt deposit here. Lush prairie grass here. River with Rapunzel-like weeds coursing through here. More salt. Some coniferous trees. Buffalo grazing peacefully, little black dots way in the distance.

Down on the plain, the sand is hard and hot underfoot. Neck-high grass on the other side of the river sways in the breeze and the air comes at us in bursts of sweetness. The sun is blinding, the colours shocking and real. Salt collects in columns as high as my waist at the opening of a spring near the base of the escarpment. And I laugh, because I feel like I've been dropped into a hermeneutic circle as expressed in landscape. This makes sense.

"Yeah, it does," says the biologist I'm with.

"Is Mike taking you to Grosbeak Lake tomorrow?" she asks. I nod.

She shakes her head. "Now that place is just plain weird."

The impossibly long legs of a crane lay perfectly splayed on mud cracked with dryness, two feathers nearby the only betrayal that it was once more than this; that it was alive.



map

FACT: URANIUM IN THE Slave area was mined in the early 1940s for the Manhattan Project. The freaking Manhattan Project. They loaded it on barges on the Hay and Slave Rivers, where it went down the Mackenzie to the Beaufort Sea.

All morning Mike gives me the spiel that isolation here is a selling point, how the business philosophy in this part of the country is to stay small. I've been listening. We drove down Wood Buffalo's main road for two hours and didn't see anyone else but buffalo. They disappeared into the forest like ghosts, dissolved almost. It's the height of summer and tourist season, and the campground in Fort Smith is half-full on the busiest weekend of the year. That means that nine sites are taken up. So, ok.

It's an interesting concept, but it's inherently counter to the idea of business. I mean, the whole point of selling something is to get more people interested in what you have to sell, and then you deal with the consequences...

Suddenly, I look up. We've been hiking through forest for about 20 minutes and suddenly we're at the edge of it. Grosbeak Lake. Mike is ahead of me, standing on a lakebed that hasn't seen water in a few centuries. He's quiet, which is almost more jarring than the landscape. The shore of the lake is half a mile away and between us and it is an expanse of salt. I wish I could tell you that it was like something, but honestly, it's not like anything but itself. Weird, the biologist had said. The sky is a blue so intense you feel like you could reach all the way to the moon, rimmed with knives of evergreen and salt so uniform and devoid of colour you think you can see the curvature of the earth. Small boulders are scattered across it, slowly being eaten away by the salt. We walk across it, stepping over delicate shards like ice forming, or hoarfrost, except that it's 30 above, and it's salt. It's a bit like being in the middle of a bowl of cereal just after someone's sprinkled some brown sugar on it, and looking up into an infinite sky.

Mike stands with his hands on his hips, one leg pushed out a bit further than the other. He adjusts his sunglasses and grins at the scenery. He looks back at me.

"You go to Banff, you're going to see people. You come here..."

I bite.

NOT MUCH FURTHER AWAY, Mike and I go swimming in a sinkhole. Where two sinkholes are joined, to be exact. We swim at the narrowest point, where the two strands of the symbol of infinity intersect, if you can picture it. ∞ . Right there. The water is deep



and clear and cool and forever changing colour from one intensity to another. Blue. Green. Black. Mike's still grinning. I wonder if he's ever unhappy. He came up here on a two-year contract 10 years ago.



Fort Smith is hopping. It's opening night at the South Slave Friendship Festival and a small, transient crowd has gathered at the stage in the park in the centre of town. Bands play and people just come and go, or hop up on stage with them and join in, then hop off and mill about, catching up on gossip or dipping into the old movie theatre next to the park, which is open just to sell popcorn and extralong strawberry Twizzlers.

A woman pushes a stroller full of groceries, and a baby in there somewhere. Kids are hanging out at Liz's having a sludgie. An Aboriginal man with fantastic wrinkles sits on a bench at an abandoned corner, shouting hello at anyone who happens to catch his eye, no matter how far away they are. Everyone seems happy, or at least content. The roar of the Rapids of the Drowned on the Slave River fills the dead air between songs and bands. Someone built an inuk-



OUTPOSTINGS: NORTHERN CHILE, ATACAMA DESERT

WHEN TO GO: The north of the country can be visited all year round, although the unpredictable phenomenon known as the Bolivian Winter or invierno antiplánico can produce heavy sporadic rainfall between December and February (the height of summer), washing away roads and disrupting communications. Bring both warm and cold weather clothing as the temperature changes with the altitude and mountain winds.

GETTING THERE: LanChile flies direct to Santiago, Chile, from several major US cities year-round.

GUIDES: The town of San Pedro is a nexus of adventure activities catering to all manner of desert sports, from horseback riding to cycling, climbing

HIGHLIGHTS: Museo Arqueológico Padre le Paige, Valle de la Muerte, Valle de la Luna, Quebrada del Diablo, Foothills of Lascar, Laguna Miscanti, Laguna Miniques, The geysers of Tatio, Salar de Atacama, plus climbing any of the many hills and volcanoes. Acclimatisation, correct equipment and often a guide are required for such excursions.

GENERAL INFORMATION: Chile Board of Tourism, www.visit-chile.org; more Chile tourism links from the Chilean embassy in Washington, www.chile-usa.org/tourismlinks.htm

TRIPS:

Unexplored Nature – A good introduction to Chile's startling natural diversity, spend 4 days exploring the Atacama and Altiplano from a base in San Pedro, then fly south for 3 days in the stunning lush Andean fjordland near Puerto Montt.

8 days, from \$1,875 US

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shuk on a slab of smooth granite that pokes out into the river between yesterday and now. It's a big one. I stare at it for a long time.

A souped-up Honda with tinted windows and Ontario plates thumps past, leaving a wake of muffled electrobeat. Outside the Arctic Oasis Lounge, there's a dirty, scratched 4x4 with three river kayaks and a mountain bike crammed onto its roof. From Texas. A cloud of laughter floats out from the bar, then evaporates.

A guy comes up to me, tells me that if I want a ticket for the Super Shaker tomorrow night ("basically a dance at the arena where the locals drink too much"), I can't get one because it's sold out. "But if you come with me...", he says. Less than a minute later, he locates a ticket. Twenty-seven of them, in fact.

Later that night, I meet someone who starts a story with a deadpan face and "Now back when Moby Dick was just a minnow..." and fall in love with his idealism, the complete fusion of humour with consequence.

"AND WELL, THEY LIKE the Bingo, eh?" Jane says about her friends. She's describing the process of fish scale painting. You take the scales off the fish and clean them, then make a picture with them, scale by scale. Thing is, fish scale artists up here now say that bingo markers work just as well to paint the scales as anything else. And by golly you should see the colours jump out at you. They never did that with regular paint.

Jane is a craft artist. She teaches workshops on moccasin-making and beading, caribou tufting, porcupine quill embroidery and so on. She says to me, "I made a deal with my husband." Did she ever.

They have a cabin on the trapline. Each winter they go and stay there for a couple of weeks to trap things, go other places to shoot bigger things. She's got eight or nine beaver skins nailed to boards drying out in her garage right now, just did them yesterday. But this is the deal, she tells me. "I made him give me one pelt of every kind of animal we shot."

She pulls them out of hockey bags stashed in a big shed at the back of her property. Muskox. Winter caribou. Marten. Beaver. Wolf. Moose. Grizzly. Jane shows me two hides. One of the winter caribou, plush and soft and smooth, completely unblemished. Like a field of snow fresh after a storm, at the moment that the wind dies. Sparkling in sunshine, pure, before it has a chance to settle into the landscape's hollows. Infinity. The second is a summer hide of caribou – thinner, weaker, pockmarked with holes bored through it by worms – parasites that reside in

the caribou's skin. "There's not much you can do about that," she says. It's just the way it is.

Have you ever read *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje? There's a scene in which Anil describes a tree whose branch system is an exact replica of its root system, the part of the tree you assume you can never see. Right then, when Jane showed me those caribou skins, swishing through the stench of beaver flesh; when I stood on the edge of the escarpment and saw those buffalo glide across the plain; on the plane flying over Great Slave Lake and standing in a sea of driftwood a few hours later, I felt like I was looking at a cross-section of a smoke tree; suspended between history and possibility, between definition and evolution. I felt housed between reflections, and I understood why we need and how we are defined not merely by places of strange and isolated beauty but by the distance between them, whether they are pinpoints or unending ribbons.

It's like what Mike said as he swam through the intersecting lines of the sinkholes again and again. He said living up here is like living in a loop and I bought that too, without having to ask what he meant.

over