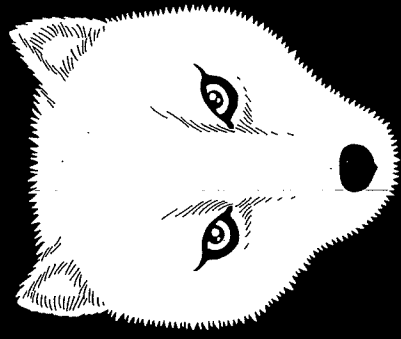


T A N Y A

T A G A Q



S P L I T

T O O T H

"One of the most incredible things I've ever read."

JESSE WENTE, CBC RADIO

Inhale small fears they turn into doubts into words into ideas
into anger into hatred into violence.

Exhale large fears and large words they tumble back onto you
it's easy to get buried by our own mirrors.

Inhale small fears and they whisper and travel to your mind
observe them and thank them for trying to protect you.

Exhale acknowledgment of the beauty within your instincts
and the courage to love small fears.

Inhale hard love suck in the smell and reward reap eat chew
swallow devour all the goodness and love that is given to you.

Exhale calmness in acknowledgment of the beauty within the
courage it takes to not fear love.

11
It's a dusty summer night in the High Arctic. The sun is
shining brightly overhead. The sun always brings life and mis-

chief, serenity and visions. It's two o'clock in the morning and
I've shrugged off my curfew. There will be hell to pay when
I get home and my father's thunderous footsteps shake the
house with a blazing ire that only he can conjure.

It's worth it to disobey and join my brethren in our cele-
bration of freedom, electricity, and curiosity. Fingertrips
anxious and knock knees oscillating, we conjure and conspire;
we harness desires and swat away doubt. The winter was long
and oppressive. We all knew that soon we would be in our
teenaged years and this time was precious. All children on
the cusp of puberty seem to understand that this magic time
will end soon. Greeting the future and yearning for maturity
and yet planted firmly in the moon. Revelling in our youth,
wishing it would never end. Never seeing past the tips of our
noses as we are driven through our bodies with the perfect
lightning strike of growing cells and perceived immortality.

We transcend time and pluck smiles off each other's faces. Dig giggles out of rib cages and shoot insults as if they were compliments.

There is a siren that sounds in our small town to announce the curfew. At noon and at 10 p.m. Every time the siren sounds all the sled dogs howl, and I imagine that they think there is a large, loud god dog that rules the land howling. I equate this with religion. A short-sighted and desperate attempt for humans to create reason and order in a universe we can't possibly comprehend. The simple truth is we are simply an expression of the energy of the sun. We are the glorious manifestation of the power of the universe. We are the fingertips of the force that drives the stars, so do your job and FEEL.

Our black-haired human pack has decided to hang out by the steps behind the school. Our gnashing teeth and gums hungry for activity, tongues generating conflict and imaginary realities where we were interesting and relevant, not just kids on the school steps. Not part of this boring old town of twelve hundred souls (if you only count the humans, but whoever said only humans can have the universe living in them?). The back steps are a less conspicuous choice than the front because the summer sun reveals all to prying eyes. There is a large water tank by the back steps; this is good. We can use it to hide behind if we hear the bylaw truck. This is one of our favourite games, hiding from the bylaw

enforcement officer. His job is to drive around town and chase the kids home and shoot stray dogs. He wants us to be safe in bed. Are beds safe anyways?

Brightness. Laughter. We are a gangly group of five girls and one small boy. We are struck in the horrid torrent of awkward crushes and curious sideways glances. Clumsy advances with no goal other than to say someone liked you. The time of wistfully watching the teenagers French kiss by the jukebox and hoping one day we would be free to say yes. In those days I didn't even know how to say no.

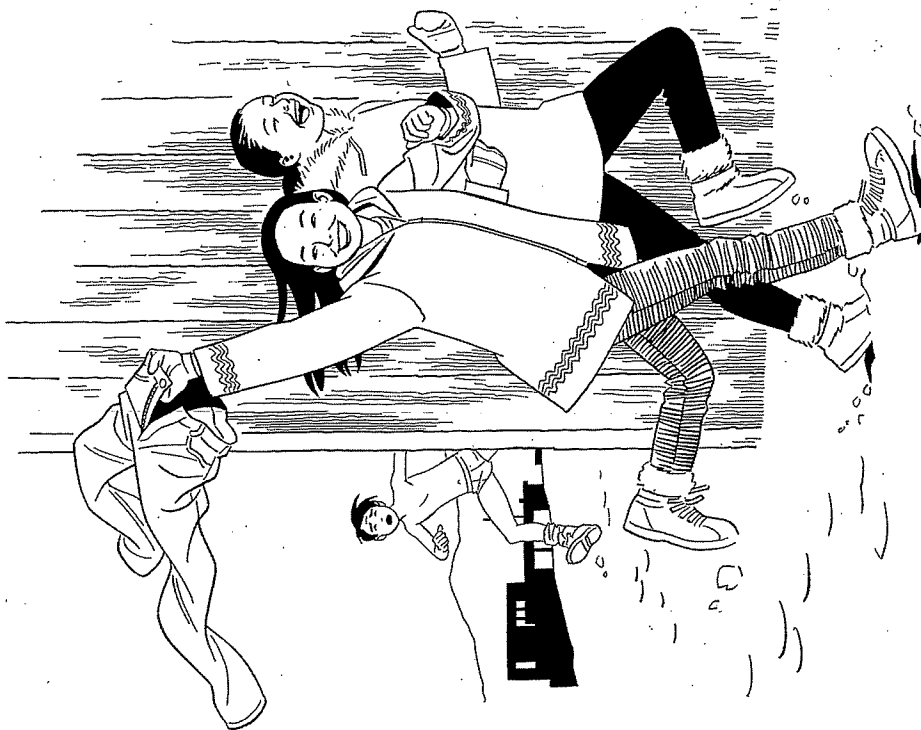
All I had was my speed and agility. Alas the boys have just recently gotten faster, stronger, and taller than I and it breaks me because I used to be the best. My ego is in a state of flux. I am powerless now and have lost my flagpole in our social setting. I was the fastest. It's a tough pill to swallow for a tomboy. I miss being able to beat the boys. I used to be a ball-kicker. The one boy hanging out with us this evening is a little younger than the rest of us; cocksure, and small for his age. His skin is dark brown and his eyes so black. I love the way his hair is so black that it shines blue in the sun. He is so very cute, yet his voice has not cracked yet, his balls haven't dropped. The girls want to hold him like a doll. But he's a dick, the way only insecure people can be a dick. He annoys me in a lot of ways, but nothing needles me more than the way he makes fun of me for having a crush on my friend. She doesn't know it, so the boy's adolescent judgment leaves me

embittered and confrontational. I've always loved girls, and our insufferable town sees this love as deviance. This little shithead is not helping.

We are picking up stale old cigarette butts and smoking the last puffs off them, burning our lips and fingers on the indignity of it all. There are always plenty of butts around the Bay or the Co-op, but we have exhausted the supply tonight. The high school kids usually smoke around these back steps, so we find some good long ones because the kids have to throw them away when the teachers try to sneak up and catch them red-handed.

The little boy is in a taunting mood. He is yapping about how boys are just better than girls. Boys are stronger, boys are faster, and boys are smarter. Faggots are disgusting and he hates them. He looks like a mosquito to me. I have an idea. I jump down from my perch on the railing and grab him from behind. He is so slight. I wrestle him easily to the ground and tell the others to help me. We are laughing hysterically. I peel off his shirt. His little brown tummy is so taut. Wiry little six-pack, skinny little arms. We take off his pants too. His ankles are so thin. He is so delicate. He has large black moles peppered on his dark skin. He smells like smoke and panic. He has no hair yet. Two girls hold his legs, one his arms, and I'm pulling his clothes off. It's our turn to be mean.

He is yelling for us to quit it, but we are tickling him, so he is also laughing uncontrollably. We leave his underwear



and socks alone for dignity's sake and take his pants and shirt. We run as fast as we can towards Main Street with our bounty as he follows, screaming for us to return his clothing. As we turn the corner onto Main, we see other groups of kids. I assume that he won't dare be seen unclothed, but he bravely turns the corner and simply throws the other group a toothy smile and keeps sprinting. Gasping breaths and burning lungs, thighs aflame; we let the world own us. Soles flying and hearts pounding, we turn the next corner and see a group of adults. Gleeefully squealing, we keep going knowing he will not pursue. He won't risk being seen by adults.

I think of all the times I have been told I was inferior for being a girl. I think about all the times men have touched me when I didn't want them to. I think about how good it feels to be waving the pants of one of the cocky boys in the air while he hides behind the corner. We keep running and circle the school. He is waiting for us on the other side, swatting mosquitoes and crying. This is not the last time he will get himself into trouble with bravado that cannot be backed up. He ends up dying that way.

THE TOPOGRAPHY OF PITY

Look at other humans with pity.

Why are they so downtrodden?

What could possibly have happened to them?

What could possibly have happened to you?

They may see the consumer sickness

They may see the pride sickness

They may see the detachment sickness

Your belongings won't save you

Money won't save you, even if you save it

Money has spent us, as we have spent it

We look upon the scarred earth with pity

What have we done to her?

Isn't it she who has given her minerals

And electricity

To spit us out,

Give us life?

Only to suck us back in

Just so she can breathe with the seasons?

Just so we can be her topsoil?

Perhaps she looks upon us not with the love of a mother

But with the same indifference we lend to our lungs

With the same indifference

That we give the homeless human

normal cadence. I put them in my pockets. Don't put more than one in each pocket or they will start fighting. Not many creatures are good in overpopulated spaces. I have about six pockets in my windbreaker. Six lemmings a day keeps the doctor away.

Whistling my way home and brimming with anticipation for my daily ritual, I have only five lemmings today. There is a small back porch in our house. Since nobody ever uses the back door, the porch is my domain. It's a good place to hide things, a good place to pretend the rest of the world is mine. Stopping at the fridge to pick out a few carrots and some celery, I then lay the lemmings out on the floor of the bare porch. The carrots belong in the corner. The animals are afraid at first, but cannot resist the smorgasbord of food. I leave them happily munching and starting to relax.

We have a fish tank in our living room. There are newts, snails, and fish in there. The snails procreate too quickly for the health of the tank, so my ritual begins by killing off a minimum of ten snails by simply squishing their little bodies against the glass, shells and all. It is very satisfying to me to hear their shells popping, like when you find a particularly dirty part on the rug while you are vacuuming, and it all clinks up the tube in a hollow symphony.

Part two of my ritual is to take one of the newts by the tail and put it into my mouth. It sits there on my tongue, the little suction cups on its toes grasping my taste buds. I close

RITUAL

There is a small bog on the tundra about three minutes outside of town. The bog is littered with pieces of plywood blown by the fierce Arctic winds from various construction sites. The mighty winter winds and the permafrost leave only a few months for building. The construction crews work twenty-four hours a day under the midnight sun. Chasing a few pieces of plywood that have been carried off by the High Arctic winds is not a good reason to put down your tools.

Under those pieces of plywood is shelter from the wind for a myriad of species. The plywood becomes home in the vast treelessness. The wood becomes a dark sanctuary safe from all the predators. We find creatures underneath the plywood, from beetles and baby birds to lemmings. The lemmings are my favourite. They get so startled as I rip off the ceiling from their safety, blindly running to find escape from this monster that has changed their world.

After chasing and capturing them I hold each one in my cupped hands, singing to it until its heartbeat returns to

my mouth. It crawls around in confusion for a minute, and then finds comfort in the heat and darkness. It squirms its way under my tongue, and usually falls asleep there. I do some chores as it rests, opening my mouth to let some fresh air in. I go and look into the bathroom mirror. The newt is almost always sleeping, its cute little eyes closed and restful, using my tongue as a huge duvet. I find it adorable. I return him to the tank, and go to find my furry friends.

The lemmings are fed and full. I lie down in the small porch. I can fit lengthwise in the porch if my knees are bent. I fan out my long hair on the floor and wait. I lie still. The lemmings calm, and begin to stir. They find my hair. This awakens their burrowing instinct. They make their way to my scalp, seeking safety. The smallest of paws massaging my head at lightning speed. They never leave the safety of my hair. They keep going for about ten minutes before they get weary of attempting to dig. It's the best ten minutes of my day. It's still the best massage I have ever gotten. Once they tire, I put them back into my pockets and return them to where I found them. I have to get them out before my parents come home. The lemmings are full of carrots and happy. I will come back tomorrow. My mother once found one small piece of lemming poop in my hair. She laughed so hard and wondered how it got in there. I told her I was lying down on the tundra. I have kept this small ritual to myself until now.



1978

It's early morning. The Frosted Flakes have grown soggy. I'm struck staring at one of the half-submerged flakes, half crispy, half mushy. Tap tap tap the spoon against the ceramic bowl; it seems to help shake off the sleep that refuses to lift from the top of my head. It feels fuzzy and numb. Boredom hangs over. It's pitch-black outside. Dead winter. We have not seen the sun in months. Stars stare at me through the window. Wind screams urgently, shaking the house. Wind sings but carries an axe instead of a note.

A dog howls. Five more follow suit. I put on my kamiiit and kick the door open because it has frozen shut. School has not been cancelled: it's not cold enough outside. It has to be at least minus fifty with the wind chill to merit a day off. The roads are frozen solid; they will stay that way until May or June.

The permafrost is living under everything, slowing time and preserving what would normally rot. Kamiit help feet deftly navigate the slip of the ice, the crunch of the snow,

and the depths of the drifts. The sealskin is warm, but I have lost the blood my feet carry. The Cold has scared the blood out of my toes. Our feet have built-in memory of which tendons to curl to prevent falling on all different kinds of ice. The Snow would sometimes slice the surface of the ice in half with a drift, and try to trick us into falling. The Snow could crunch underfoot or chase you loosely. The Snow could hold your whole body weight or decide to deceive you and plunge you into the down underneath.

Snow is fickle. Snow picks itself up and goes wherever Wind tells it to. One element controls the other in a cyclical oblivion. Weather is just the earth's breaths. Wind is the cold bearer and the death bringer. Streetlights hold halos of swirling snow; rainbows appear if you look at the streetlights and squint. My footsteps the only sound of any human being, I continue the hollow morning walk to school.

Deep breath

Ice in lung

Frog in throat

Lava in belly

Grade eight. Ugh. I have another giant cold sore on my chin. It's ten miles wide and oozing. I do my best to disguise it with my scarf and steel my ego for the taunting that I am about to receive. "Soresees" is the name that gets appointed to the

person suffering from a cold sore for the entirety of its duration. This name can also be applied to chickenpox, eczema, bed bug bites, zits, or any other skin ailment. The series of nicknames allotted to the students in our school were never kind, but often so amusing that we were happy to carry the burden when it was our turn. I silently thank the universe that I will never be branded "Nibble-a-cock" like my friend Casper Noviligak because she gave a blowjob to that hotdog on a dare last Thursday.

It took me fifteen minutes to pull these jeans on this morning. They are so tight that it hurts to breathe. Sometimes I have to use a coat hanger to get the zipper up. The tighter the jeans the better, and neon is in; neon leg warmers, neon tights, neon shirts, neon banana clips. We pile our hair as high as it will go, even though the wind destroys our hairdos to the point that every time we come in from outside, the girls' bathroom is a haze of Final Net. We sport Chip and Pepper heat-sensitive colour-changing muscle shirts (leaving us hiding our fluorescent-orange armpits after gym), and pair them with acid-washed jeans and light blue eyeshadow.

AC/DC: Dirty deeds and they're done dirt cheap.

The frosted-pink lip gloss clashed with my cold sore so I didn't wear it today. My lips are cracked and chapped and my hair is flying with static electricity and keeps getting into my cold sore. Winter is dry. Like zero humidity. The cold holds moisture hostage. The boys scuff their socks on

the carpet and shock the girls with pointed fingers and malicious glee. I hate it.

I want to be the size of an ant, or just disappear. This year everyone got boobs except me. Every morning brings the measuring tape to the mirror in the hopes of the miracle of being suddenly blessed with tits, forever ending the reign of my nickname: Golf Balls. In lieu of breasts, I arrange sheets of toilet paper to make a home nest in my brassiere. The indignities we suffer as children will only grow larger as we get older, so we are told. That seems impossible.

I get good grades in school without putting in much effort. I fail tests on purpose to avoid drawing too much ire from the popular girls, who seemed to think that accomplishing anything scholastically made you vain. School is scary and awkward; I guess it's supposed to be. Sitting still for that long is impossible. My ass is numb. Who made this system? It feels like a slow torture watching the second hand tick by, watching the flakes of dandruff fly around the teacher's head when he stands in the light. How can someone be almost bald and still have dandruff? Getting old is so gross. Watching people slowly rot is unnerving. I listen to the children breathing and sighing. We steal glances at each other. Listening to pencils scratching, we yearn for movement. Listening to the wind howl in screaming freedom, we all feel mured.

Math class. The cute boy peeks up and smiles at me over his math book while holding hands under the table with the

pretty girl. I'm aware that he is manipulating me but I still die a little inside. His black hair is in a brush cut and he smells a little mouldy, like his mom took too long to get the clothes into the dryer. He makes up for it with a searing confidence and sharp wit. Brightness. It shocks me every time he looks at me. He has already seen too much in life and his natural propensity for cruelty coupled with the hormones coursing through his body has him playing girls against each other like bristling sled dogs. He still gets to taste them all. I've always hated this social display of jealousy, girls scratching each other's eyes out for boys. If he leaves me alone I can maintain my dignity, but I feel the pull of him in a place that is foreign to me. It is my first real crush. Our teacher is discussing physics.

I think about the equal and opposite reaction to the look the boy just gave me and blush furiously. His girlfriend notices. Shit! I'm in for it after school. Doors open and close, the books in the library call me with their musty elder smell. The clocks rotate. I get my head slammed into my locker at recess, and the school day is over. Thank fuck.