

INNU

Carole Labarre

My name is Carole Labarre. I'm originally from the Innu community of Pessamit, on the St. Lawrence River, but have lived in Sept-Îles for twenty years, and the figures and images in my work reflect the wonderful specificity of my heritage. Through my writing I hope to share part of the memory of my people and the richness of our values. My prose and my poetry are a way for me to give voice to the Innu, and in particular to Elders, whose spirit remains alive through time.

ANCESTRAL MEMORY

The air smells like clay, like wet earth and salt. Here and there, piles of dirty snow still remind us of winter. I'm walking with my father and Xavier, quietly. We're hunting geese. They just got here, their wings swollen with sky. Exhausted from the long migration, the flock landed, in the same marsh as always, in a single movement, like a wave breaking gently on the shore. There are dozens of them, their heads held high, legs stuck in the mud, their wings quivering.

They haven't seen us. From the hunting blind, we watch them for a long time, fascinated by the show, powerful and strong. The geese have come from the south, they have looked upon landscapes we will never see and savoured water trickling down mountains that will never bear our footprints. A few gulls glide around nearby, their shrill cries enhancing the beauty of the moment. My father, his cigarette tucked into the corner of his mouth, tells me to cover my ears. He squints and shoots, the gesture swift and measured, and reloads and shoots again. The bang sends the birds flying in a tremendous rustle of wings. I look at my father, who quickly loads his rifle once more. Focused, he points up to

the sky, the muzzle aimed into the tumult, and fires a last shot. I watch a goose fall, spinning, its wings useless now. It hits the ground with a loud thud. I'm excited, I scramble to my feet, shouting with joy, and run to the birds lying on the ground. Their bodies are heavy, greasy, still warm. My father is right behind me. He looks at me, beaming. I walk up slowly to one of the geese. Blood beads on its beak. Delicately I lick it, holding the bird against me. My face buried in its feathers, I whisper, Sister, tell me about the long trip you've taken to come to us.

Today is Sunday. I will go to Mass and sing the melodies that have become hymns, songs transcribed in old Innu-aimun in a little black book. I have my mother's hymnal, the thin pages once edged with gold now fragile and yellowed. I love leafing through the thin, delicate paper. It reminds me of the texture of birch bark.

All the old people are clutching their hymnals, flipping frantically from one song to the next like they don't already know all the hymns by heart. They sing louder and louder, as if to fill the absence that's crept into the village church over the past few years. I'm daydreaming when suddenly I jump, startled and bewildered: the priest is ranting and raving against injustice in the world. He leaves nothing out—politics, poverty, famine. Yesterday's newlyweds watch him nervously. His voice, amplified, bounces off the walls of the church. Anxious, I look at him, my eyes wide, and suddenly the crazy urge to laugh comes over me. Father Larouche totally

caught me off guard! He resumes the litany, comes to his senses, and Mass goes on. The village priest speaks Innu-aimun mechanically, monotonously, with a horrible accent.

I thumb my rosary restlessly, muttering Hail Marys so I don't have to think. In any case, I know the liturgy by heart too. Then, from the pew behind me, I hear it—a cackle! Blasphemy! I whirl around and out of the corner of my eye I see old Sophie, her hand over her mouth, her shoulders shaking with muffled laughter, her eyes narrowed with mirth. In the middle of Mass, she's giggling! How shameless! People around us cough their reproach, and the few children in the church wriggle on the weathered pews. A few minutes later, Mass ends and I see Sophie, her scarf already over her head, dashing for the door. Her Sunday chicken is probably burning. So much for the broth in which she'd hoped to dip her bread.

I look up at the altar and the sacred objects on it. I remember when father would get ready for the fall hunt. Like Father Larouche at his altar, he would lay his equipment carefully on a cloth, taking stock. He scrubbed his traps, sharpened his axe, oiled his rifle. He caressed his crooked knife tenderly, as you might caress the face of a child. Then he would raise his head, looking at me with his beautiful blue eyes, and smile as he pulled on the pipe he kept clamped in his teeth from morning to night.

One day, Mama came into the tent, her cheeks pink from the cool late-season breeze. Her eyes full of sun, she placed a basket overflowing with red berries next

to me. "Make some jam for your father," she told me. I was seven years old. My small hands stoked the fire to crackling, and the hungry flames licked at the logs I'd just laid in the stove. I sorted the fruit from the lichen and leaves and tasted their tart flesh before dropping them in a pot, the berries drumming against the aluminium. We pick them where they grow, close to the ground, and their deep red colour is a prelude to what the season will bring, the yellow, brown, and orange. Then, for many months, frozen white and the green of the pines take over the landscape. For me, as a child, the berries meant the end of summer, and the anticipation, often tinged with a gaunt fear, of the hardships the boreal winter would bring.

In the spring, the big lake had broken free of the ice that had packed in when it turned cold. In spite of everything, several families were going hungry, including Mama's friend Marianne. I'd seen her sobbing in my uncle's tent, her hands over her face, shoulders heaving. She said she'd walked for days to find the caribou herd, heading farther and farther as the animals searched for lichen. The snow was compacted and frozen and the hunters had a hard time moving across. From sunrise to sunset, the group followed the half-moon shaped tracks. They were growing weaker by the day, the light in their eyes slowly dimming. Famine. The dreaded famine. Marianne's child had been born prematurely and was small and frail, and she regretted not having left the baby in the village with her cousin, who was pregnant with twins and whose doctor had said it would be better if she didn't go out on the land that year. They decided to bury the child out there. I remember

Mama came to get me, silently taking me by the hand. She looked at me, panicked, her eyes red and swollen. Her gaze was welded to mine, and the awareness of our connection was sealed with a deep, guttural moan. We hugged, and stayed that way for several minutes until Papa came to tell us it was time to set up camp. I could see he was suffering too, and his entire being was filled with gratitude for Papakassik^u. We depended on him, his generosity and his consideration. We were bound to him. Our life, our way of life and our culture depended on him.

Back at home, I'm chased out of my memories. Outside, a dog is barking nervously. A second, smaller, neurotic-looking dog joins in, howling. I put my knitting aside and glance at the window. It's the black dog from across the way, standing guard on the balcony. Poor thing. It's so scrawny and toothless. And here comes Matthias, an old Nordiques cap on his head, strolling down the middle of the street. He's carrying a giant crumpled black garbage bag on his back. His eyes dart around like a hunter's, and in the midday sun he scans the street for any scrap of glass or tin. He leans over to pick up a few empty beer cans. Cling! Clang! He tosses them in his bag, rubs his back for a long time, fixes his cap, and keeps walking, repeating the whole process a few steps farther on.

I look over at the neighbours' dog again, who got offended at being ignored and stopped barking. His ears low, he turns around three times and finally lies down. After a while, he yawns deeply and starts to lick his haunches.

A raven alights on the neighbour's scruffy canoe and caws stubbornly before beginning to peck, out of habit. The canoe used to belong to old Jérôme—Shenum, as we called him.

Every spring, the old man would organize his pliers and hammers, his nails, brushes, and tar to fix the damage of the previous year's expedition. He sanded the wood down and varnished it, softened the sinew of the seats with oil, and patched all the spots that seemed weak with tar.

I look at the boat on the rack. The red canvas has faded to pink. It's torn in several places, and completely shredded on the hollow belly of the hull. The wood, once a shiny, handsome golden blond, has dried to dull grey. Its former splendour is no more, but once this was a canoe that sliced across the water, gliding soundlessly on endless waves. One of those canoes portaged on the sweaty backs of the men and women whose survival depended on walking to the winter territories. A long canoe, made to follow the river, at one with the water.

When I was a child, my mother would put me in the middle of the boat. Sitting on a bundle, I watched the boreal landscape go by. Sometimes I would lie down, watching the clouds come together and break apart at the whim of the wind sweeping across the sky. I let myself be rocked by the rhythm of the paddles churning the water. I could feel the effort of my father's stroke as we neared the next camp. The thrill of the journey caught its breath then and scattered like a gust of wind fanning the flames of a forest fire. At last, we would be

able to rest on this long voyage coming to an end, after several days riding the backs of rivers and portaging.

I see Sophie at the end of the street, walking alone. As usual, she has a handbag hanging on her arm, though not the same one she had this morning at Mass. This one is shiny and black. The other one was green. Sophie, my best friend, once. But that was before. Before she told me about her arranged marriage with Xavier.

Twenty-two years dead and buried. Like it was yesterday. Xavier drowned, swallowed by the river in a soundless whirl. His canoe capsized in the waves and he sank in the cold, deep water. They found his frozen body downstream days later, several kilometres away from his camp. His son, who was with him, never got over it. He's been drowning since, devastated, without ever dying. He drinks so that he won't remember, he drinks to forget himself. Poor boy. I often see him walking by. Hunched over, staring at the ground and dragging a big garbage bag, always with the same cap on his head. Misery draped over his thin, once-powerful shoulders.

I doze off for a moment, my eyes closing against the day. Nearby, I can hear children playing in the street. An ATV speeds past. On the community radio station, Matiú sings his "Terre sauvage".