

[Untitled]

Frida Purdon

We arrived in the village that evening. By then it was August. The southern trees were beginning to colour and wilt. A few boys were playing on the shore, and they stopped to watch us approach. We slid across the dimpled surface of the lake towards the harbour. I couldn't make out the boys' faces, but as we drew nearer I saw that they were barefooted and thin. I called out to them in Ojibwe and then in English. They were silent. I did not know their names.

Someone wondered aloud where all the villagers had got to, and Robert said, I suppose they're all in Church. It's Sunday, isn't it? Nobody knew. The boys ran towards the church, which flashed in the waning light. Its white cross glowed like some splayed and faceless bird, and its paint was beginning to peel. We unloaded our canoes. When the priest appeared, florid and sweating, wringing his fat hands, following the dirt path down to the harbour, the men greeted him in a single, fragmented voice. So we were back, the priest said. He'd prayed for us. He greeted the men. He greeted the voyageurs in his stilted, pristine French. He did not look at me.

The men carried their furs to the trading post, then returned for their packs, which had once carried a selection of fine clothes and a china tea set and a book with a warped and spotted skin. Only the voyageurs had travelled lightly. I had nothing left. I was wearing the same clothes I'd been wearing for weeks. I was covered in grime and dried

blood. The blackflies which clustered at my neck had formed a black gelatinous paste. I hadn't had time to wash myself.

The priest said we must be hungry and led us towards the inn, which stood in the village square. Its windows were mottled with the last threads of light. It was very quiet. A new flower edged the dirt pathway and limned the village square. It covered the great stone embankments which circled the village; it lighted the stone like a living sheen. I crouched down to examine the flower's yellow umbels. There was a movement in the shadows and an animal appeared, wolfish but narrow-faced, with eyes that addressed us like a man's. I knew it was a dog. Many of the voyageurs kept dogs. Dogs pulled their sleds in the winter months and fed the voyageurs when they starved. They've bred, the priest told Amory. They're everywhere now. Begging and—he kicked the dog, who cried but did not run. I should kill it, one of the voyageurs said. Put it out of its misery. He spoke in French. By then they knew I understood everything. No, sir, I said. That isn't misery. That's hunger.

The inn was empty and dim. We sat at a wooden table, which had a bloody sheen in the sun. The bar-maid brought the men their drinks and their plates of food. The men's eyes lit up when they saw her. They asked her name. She was now called Antoinette. The voyageurs knew her. They had always laughed about the fact that she did not know what her name meant and that she tended to her sable hair studiously. She was once caught searching for herself in the blurred disc of a spoon. Not eating, Eliza? Robert said. He told Antoinette to bring me something. When she returned he withdrew his eyes from my face and watched her. Her hair flashed blackly. She looked like a squaw. There was a pleasant definition to her. Tell them, will you, Antoinette said, in Ojibwe, that I'm not a whore. The whore's upstairs. She's been preening herself. She saw

you come in, and she got very excited. No one comes to visit her anymore.

"All the traders have gone?"

"Didn't he tell you?" She glanced at the priest.

"He told us about the dogs and rats."

"Well, many of the children have been dying. The churchyard's full of fresh graves. He says God's subtleties are lost on us." She used the English word: God. Her English was clear and restrained. "Some people think we're being punished!"

"For what? That seems unreasonable."

"She'll be down any minute now. She's been preparing herself. She must be lonely. The children used to visit her, but the priest says they should be spared. They're very good children, and they know what their sister is."

"What are you two saying?" Robert said. His mouth was full of food.

"I am telling Eliza about her family, sir," Antoinette said. I thought she was being mawkish. I thought she was trying to make it known to me that she was as lucid and contemptuous as any churchman and that she hated the village with the sort of clarity unknown to women. Her enmity made her clever. She was sure I would understand.

The priest was speaking with Amory. His large, meaty hands twitched and thrashed as he spoke. He ate nothing, and when Antoinette asked him if he wanted anything he shook his head, like a slighted child, kneading his robe. I heard him ask Amory if we had been successful and saw Amory smile and bow his head. I could see the priest rallying his defenses. He was writing God's justification as he sat there, wide-eyed, his large mouth appearing to chew

itself, as he watched the old man speak into his plate. Her looks won't last much longer, Antoinette said in Ojibwe.

"Sorry?"

"You should explain that each time they siphon a little away. Like the stories they used to tell about the photograph—each photograph wears away your realness, like paint, till one day the camera has all of you: your features and limbs, all stacked up in its eye. It's like that with the men."

"I've never heard of that. Do you mean, the men consume her? Like cannibals?"

"Look." I followed Antoinette's gaze; Vera was drifting down the stairs. She was very thin. Her hair was loose. The voyageurs noticed her and appeared to cheer, to swear at her in rapid French. Vera smiled. What is it? the priest said, looking up. You should not be here. This is not the time. I saw the boats, Vera said, and Antoinette winced. I saw you arrive. And I thought it was so terrible that there was no one to greet you when you came. Well, why didn't you come down, Robert said. Vera clasped her hands. You all look well, she said. I am glad. That's very nice, Miss Racollet, the priest said. We are somewhat busy at the moment. Why don't you tell them, Antoinette said in Ojibwe, what she is?

"They already know."

"The Englishman and his son seem to think she's a lady."

"They don't think any of us ladies."

"Then why is the boy looking at her like that?"

She seemed to be laughing, soundlessly. Sit down, Robert said. Please. Vera sat down. She clasped her hands and bowed her head; the priest was eyeing the surface of

the table, with its knots like dark wounds. The voyageurs were whispering to each other and laughing. One of them caught me watching him and smiled, flashing his browned teeth. They were all very young, the voyageurs, young as I was, and I felt myself being drawn into the joke. It is good to see a friendly face, Amory, said. One of the voyageurs made a comment about Vera's friendly face. The others laughed. I stared at the air behind Vera. Antoinette began to clear the table. The crucifix she wore matched the priest's. We were all afraid, Vera said. You were gone so long. And the village—she glanced at the priest, who said that they had all prayed. You prayed for us? Robert said. There was laughter among the voyageurs, and Robert's eyes flitted to their faces.

"I did."

"And do you live here?"

"I have lived in the village all my life. Sir."

"Have you? Well. I mean, do you live in the inn?"

"Sometimes."

"What is it you want, Miss Racollet? Food? We will buy you food. Antoinette, girl." Antoinette appeared. "Bring Miss Racollet a plate."

Vera insisted she was alright. She did not look at me as I stared at her face, her hands. When Antoinette returned she whispered, in Ojibwe, They think she's an *ogimaak-we*. A queen.

"They're all laughing at her." Vera looked up at me.

"They're laughing at us, too."

Antoinette didn't respond. She disappeared, and the conversation resumed: Amory telling us about the journey, the hardships we had faced and the lands we had mapped

and the animals we had killed, and the Indians. The Indians who had followed us, attacked us in the night. How they had pinned me down and torn at my skirts, while the good men saved me from myself.

After we had eaten, the priest said, I should like to discuss something privately with your captain here. He smiled at us but kept his eyes vague. I got up and followed the voyageurs outside. They were laughing at something. He likes her, one of them said to me, in French. He likes her, because she doesn't know what he's saying, eh?

"That may be so."

"It is so." Then, to his friends, "Did you see how the Father was embarrassed? It was as if he were sitting at the Devil's table. And his master was in the other room."

"Poor girl."

The sky was bruised and darkening, but the lake was still refulgent, and the horizon glowed. Still, the village square was empty; only the dog lying with his head on his paws, glanced at us. I noticed the flower again. I wonder what this is, I said. I seemed to have said it in French.

"Eh? Don't you know?"

"I've never seen it before."

"Not much of an Indian, eh?"

It would die come winter, I said. The voyageurs did not catch my meaning. They never caught my meaning; they were impregnable like that; they had minds like stones. They threw rocks at the dog, who scampered back into the shadows.

"What's wrong, Elize?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Nothing! What's this? Nothing's wrong?"

Now they were demonstrating how one should talk to a woman of poor understanding.

"It's like with a dog. It doesn't matter so much what you say but *how* you say it. It's the tone." And he demonstrated, till the men fell over laughing.

When Vera appeared, the voyageurs went quiet. In Ojibwe, I said, What were you doing in there?

"I was talking with that boy."

She smiled at the men, and then noticed the dog, who had come crawling back, seeping in like damp, and her face changed.

"They don't think well of you, those men."

"They were very friendly. The old man, I forget his name, he asked me all about my life, and my father, who's still quite sick, you know. And he asked about the children, and what sort of Christian I was."

"That's very nice."

"It was." She glanced at me. "You never think anyone's nice."

"It's true."

"You think only you can see the ugliness of things."

"What's happened here? It's empty. Antoinette—" I used her Ojibwe name "—says something's happened, and the

children have been dying, and the people are worried Manitou is trying to impress something upon them."

"There's been a sickness."

I asked her to describe it. It was the usual sort of thing, she said. And it was true, people were worried, maybe it was Manitou, or maybe it was the Lord, who was punishing them mysteriously, according to an obscure form of justice, which the priest said was a justice we should submit to, lovingly, and which we could not understand. Your mother's alright, she said.

"The priest's kept her safe then."

"Some of the village men, Indians, brought her food, but she wouldn't eat it. Even if she hadn't eaten in a long while—because we could always tell—she would cry and beg us not to make her be as we were. And then the priest would come, and save her. The priest saves her all the time, I think he likes it. He likes saving her more than he likes saving anybody else, even me, he acts like it's a chore when I go to Confession."

The voyageurs were shooting the rats.

"Let's go."

We walked, and the dog followed behind us.

"You shouldn't have done that with the men. You'll give them ideas."

"They already have ideas."

She kicked a stone, like a kid. She must've been my age now. It was unclear. It was all written down, in some tome, in the priest's rooms.

I kept at it: That was stupid of you.

"How have I...?" She stopped. "I didn't... I meant to show them courtesy."

She did not keep her cards close to her chest; everything was visible, every movement of her heart and brain, like the veins in Amory's hands. She didn't understand. She had never played cards. I had told her once that she was like a woman from a novel, and she had not understood. You had to parse things, you had to pare the world down.

"I've never... I've only ever been cordial. And kind. I do think kindness is reasonable, Migizi?"

"I mean, you wear your heart on your sleeve." One should live cleanly, I said. One should not live with oneself visible, like a stain.

We walked down to the shore. I took off my shoes and waded into the pellucid green water. My feet were blistered and sore, and I hadn't shown anything of myself in weeks. There were scabs on my feet and shins, like unformed eyes. Vera said, You should go to the medicine woman.

"I'm alright."

She wanted to know what had happened. Out there. The men looked alright, she said. "Look again."

"It went badly?"

I paused. "Yes."

"You said you were confident you could find the creature."

"I was sure I could play to the men's delusions."

"So it's real then? The creature?"

"We have to treat it as if it were. We have to give up on this sense of reality we all have. Like when they first came here—back when my grandfather was chief—and we laughed at their stories of a butchered God. We needn't have believed. We need only have listened."

"The old man and his son seem kind."

She was all wrong today, I said. A loon called, first its song of loneliness, then of fear. It shattered the water and rose stumbling into the sky, as if mounting a jagged invisible stair. Then there was silence, and in the silence the sound of the men. I knew how to find them, no matter the place; I could pick out the sound of them anywhere and follow it back to its source, like a thread, like a slip of blood. I tried to explain: the voyage had been a failure. Amory had chosen to regard the failure as poetic, as an emblem of the North's inscrutability, its refusal to be known, but it was, materially and in every possible way, a failed mission: the creature was out there still, in the minds of the men, if nothing else.

Someone was there. I turned. It was Robert. He opened his arms. I wondered where you got to, he said.

"That's kind, sir."

"Miss—" He looked at Vera.

"Racollet," she said.

"It was a pleasure. It is a pleasure."

"Yes. I think so too."

He laughed. I was going to say, He is laughing because your ignorance pleases him. You speak haltingly. He can see you think.

"I think I've met you before. When I first came to the village."

You could see his mind slide all over the place when he spoke.

"Yes, I think you're right."

She didn't know. He had thought of her, he said. Paddling was conducive to dreaming. One stared at the land until it lost its shape; that was the story of his forebears, the early explorers and trappers, who had hewn such erroneous maps. It was difficult to see the New World, his father, Amory, said, for it was scarred over with the Old: with Scotland and France and the grey lines of England. Even Eliza cannot see it. I had inherited the white man's eyes. I wore them, like a scrim, over my own.

For months he had seen only the walls of his own brain: the coffee houses of England, his mother—dead now, but kept in vague effigy in a rusted locket he wore around his throat—and Vera, who was, he said, the prettiest squaw he'd ever seen. Though I hardly know you, he said, inclining his head. He was ruddy and sweating. He was always sweating, even when he was cold. His body was so maimed and mottled by blackfly bites that it looked like the ruined shape of a man. It had a cadaverous, inhuman quality, though this was less visible when he was clothed. Clothed he was, heartedly, an Englishman. His yellow hair and pale eyes lent him a gilded quality. It was the gilded quality which Vera admired. *On dit*, voyageurs said, that we are beasts. It was said that the North stripped the varnish from a man and watered down his mind. It robbed the voyageurs and the English and the Scots of their civility. These men were not like Vera and Esquiwak and I, born to a dulled and meagre humanity, but were tragic figures, doomed by their proximity to the savage and his ways, to the land, though closer, perhaps, to reality, which they

imagined was like a denser blood concealed beneath the visible world. Robert and Amory were different, preserved. They retained the gloss of the Old World.

Here Vera's English failed her. She glanced at me and smiled. I translated. He has a wonderful way with words, she said.

"That's me. He sounds like a gull when he speaks."

"Tell him how much I appreciate what he says. That it's beautiful."

To Robert in English I said, She thinks you are eloquent, sir. She is touched.

He glanced at Vera and said, Touched...? I hear she's a whore, Eliza. He couldn't help himself. He smiled.

"Our ways are different, sir. We often regard that as a preface to love."

"What, whoring?" He eyed Vera. "She is a half-breed, like you? Though she is not nearly so pale... She wears it better, I think.."

"All the world says so, sir."

"Recollet sounds like a Canadien name?"

"Her father was a trapper, sir."

"She must know some French?"

"No, sir. He... He has been here a long time. He has forfeited that part of him."

"You mean, he thinks he's an Indian."

Vera said, in Ojibwe, Is everything alright? He seems—

"He aggravates himself."

"Is that why he isn't with the others?"

"They despise him, and he pretends to despise them, too."

"Tell Miss Racollet," Robert said. "That I would I could see her."

He hopes to visit you, I told Vera.

"Not at the inn. At my father's cabin."

"What about the children?"

"They'll be asleep."

"They always know. I knew, with my mother."

"They're alright, Migizi."

She wasn't looking at me but at him, and she was grinning. It was true; she was darker than I, and looked less washed-out, as if she were made of a denser, finer matter. I was too pale, it did not suit me, and my eyes were small, muddied-green. They made me appear bald. I was, for all intents and purposes, not just plain but ugly, viscerally so; even my body, though lithe and delicate, looked like something peeled from beneath a rock and exposed too soon to the sun.

I told Robert about the children.

"Well, that doesn't sound right."

"No. Though she is kind to them—kind, as you say your mother was. As an Englishwoman is kind."

"But they shouldn't be exposed to that sort of thing, should they?"

"What sort of thing, sir? To conversation?"

He sneered.

"Are the children hers?"

"Her father's."

He squinted at Vera's face, which was blank, like a rose.
"Where is her mother?"

"Dead, sir."

"Most of the mothers are dead, it seems. Though not yours." He looked at me. "The priest has kept her safe, I should think." He began to laugh. "I've heard all about it, Eliza."

There was the sound of laughter, French curses; the voyageurs had appeared. They stumbled down to the shore, illumined in the last light of the gloaming. The lake was still. The fishing boats were returning, bearing their half-breed men, green-eyed and darkened. The men were taking off their clothes. Amory had seated himself on the log and was staring at the gilt water, mumbling to himself. Vera smiled and covered her mouth with her long hand. I said, Don't look. We both turned away.

Robert, like his father, seemed to have folded in on himself, wilted; his eyes were glazed and he had wandered away, into the quilled reeds. There was the sound of laughter, splashing; Amory—whom I had expected to be enervated—smiled and said, When in Rome... Robert frowned.

"This is hardly Rome."

Blackflies clustered in blots, like blurred ink among the pines. The lake still bore the trees' reflections; I remem-

bered Amory saying, How can the photograph, the mirror, be an aberration, when look, here is the earth looking at itself. The savage shunned photographs and mirrors, he shunned even maps, as if to make an image of a thing was to slaughter it. The map was not a carcass, its lines were not the bones of the denuded world; this had to be explained, for the savage believed life could only be known with one's body, with one's skin. I'd had my photograph taken with the men once, and had lifted my face to greet the thing that nested in the camera. I was the descendent of people faceless as animals, and I had been permitted entry into the future. I had been caught and put down.