Tanya Tagaq. *Split Tooth*. Penguin Random House Viking Canada, 2018. 208 pp. ISBN 978670070091.

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In *Split Tooth*, Tanya Tagaq takes readers into life in a small town in Nunavut in the 1970s. In a powerful first person narrative focalized by a young girl in a northern community, we share the joy of kids let loose in town after a long Artic winter, the craziness of teen fashion in severe climates, and the children's lived knowledge of abuse in a community still dealing with reverberations from the residential school system. Longlisted for the 2018 Giller Prize, Canada's premier literary prize for fiction, *Split Tooth* explores the fierce love, the crazy cliques, and the rash explorations of youth.

Dedicating her text to "the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and survivors of residential schools," Tagaq opens the first chapter, dated 1975, with the sentence "Sometimes we would hide in the closet when the drunks came home from the bar" (1). Episodes of children hiding in closets, evading drunken adults, listening to "Wet sounds of flesh breaking and dry sounds of wood snapping, or is that bone?" (2) punctuate the text, occasionally accompanied by black and white illustrations by Jaime Hernandez. The inclusion of the drawings and poems in *Split Tooth* "demand an intense engagement to *read* creatively and *look* mindfully" as Hertha D. Wong asserts in her recent work on visual autobiographies (9). Wong's argument that visual life narratives demand a more intensely active engagement because "moving between image and text relies on defamiliarization that requires us to become more self-aware of the process of decoding and interpreting image and text at the same time" (10) fits Tagaq's text overall. Tagaq demands an intense engagement from readers as we enter her world, decoding the poems, connecting the drawings to the narrative chapters, following along through school fights, bullies, best friends, abuse from teachers, intense seasonal changes on the artic land, and eco-erotic encounters with various non-human beings.

Tagaq beautifully captures the extreme emotions of those childhood and teen years, "stuck in the horrid torrent of awkward crushes and curious sideways glances" (13). When spring comes, with daylight and warmer temperatures, the kids and the dogs are set free on "the dusty streets looking for adventure. Large gangs of kids and large packs of loose dogs roam the town. I wonder which group is more rabid." (7) The children pick up old cigarette butts and smoke the last puffs from them, chasing and taunting each other in various ways. When a boy makes fun of the unnamed narrator for having a crush on her friend, she feels "embittered and confrontational. I've always loved girls, and our insufferable town see this love as deviance. This little shithead is not helping" (13). Tired of his taunting, she wrestles him to the ground and, along with the other girls, disrobes him, leaving him only in his underwear and runs away waving his pants.

> 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. (16)

Part of the emotional pull in the text comes in these moments when we move from the memory of the teenage moment into the reflection of the adult narrator, a reflection from which we learn that that bright, lively, truant child is no longer alive. Tagaq pulls in the members of her narrative audience, taking us on an emotional roller coaster through childhood in the northern town—the joys in close female friendships and connections with the land, the fears of hiding from drunken and abusive adults, the empowerment of taking back control from abusers (in another powerful scene the narrator encounters one of the teachers who has repeatedly abused her—and others—at a party where he is drunk, gets him outside and pushes him down the stairs), the whistling at the Northern Lights, and the fierce love she feels for her family, friends, and community.

In a chapter entitled "Nine Mile Lake," the narrator addresses a second person directly, "My little cousin, you were only seven years old. I was eleven, the big girl. We pilfered money and went to the store" (23). Continuing to describe the Resolute Bay store, the cigarettes they smoked, and the things they did "hoping that our mothers would not see us" (23), the narrator recalls, "I never let you tag along while hanging out with the big boys, because we were always up to no good. You were too small for all that chaos. I did my best to protect you. I still do." (23-24). The overwhelming emotion that runs through so many of these scenes is love: "I will never forget your sweet little face that day, proud and exhilarated with our accomplishment. I carried your heart in mine. I still do" (25)—the decolonial love written about by Leanne Simpson, Billy-Ray Belcourt and others. The unnamed first person narrator is fierce, observant, and loving, sharing tales of what it means to live and love in the midst of the ongoing and historical injustices of colonialism, the residential schools, and heteropatriarchy.

Taraq's narrative also provides examples of encounters in the contact zone of human and other than or more-than-human, many of which are eco-erotic experiences for the narrator. We have encounters with fox, as well as with ice that becomes a bear:

> I mount his back and ride him. My thighs squeeze him and pulse with a tingling light. We are lovers. We are married. He swims with incredible strength and we travel quickly. . . . My skin melts where there is contact with my lover. The ocean and our love fuse the polar bear and me. He is I, his skin is my skin. Our flesh grows together. (93)

Melissa Nelson, in her article "Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures," argues that these kinds of "messy, visceral, eco-erotic boundary-crossing entanglement[s] of difference . . . can engender empathy and kinship and a lived environmental ethic" (232). Certainly, the various encounters in *Split Tooth* are presented within terms of empathy, kinship and a lived relationship with an expansive notion of the land.

Perhaps the strongest example is in a chapter in which she walks out onto the sea ice and lies down. After first leaving her body, to slip into the waters below to look for Sedna, she returns to

the surface, back into her body, but "[t]he Northern Lights have descended upon me during my spirit journey" (113). The Lights sear into her body as she "melt[s] from agony to ecstasy. . . . the slitting continues down my belly, lighting up my liver and excavating my bladder. An impossible column of green light simultaneously impales my vagina and anus. My clit explodes and I am split in two from head to toe as the light from my throat joins the light in my womb and begins to make a giant figure eight in my Body" (113-14). The narrator becomes impregnated through this encounter with the Northern Lights, carrying twins. While she tells no one of the encounter, she learns lessons from the encounter and from the beings growing inside her, lessons about reciprocity, responsibility, kinship, the land.

From a child who puffed gas and picked up half-smoked cigarette butts early in the novel, then, she has become a narrator who challenges her readers to reconsider their own responsibilities to the land: "Land always answers these questions for me. Land protects and owns me. Land feeds me. My father and mother are the Land. My future children are the Land. You are the Land. We destroy her with the same measured ignorance of a self-harming teenager. That is what I was in my fifteenth year, what is your excuse?" (132) As the narrator increasingly engages with her responsibilities to an expansive kinship that includes celestial kin, future ancestors, and more, *Split Tooth* pushes us all to consider our own responsibilities to the land and land-based relationships in more capacious ways.

Split Tooth also challenges generic conventions. While Viking publishes *Split Tooth* as a work of fiction, the dust jacket description claims that "Tagaq moves effortlessly between fiction and memoir, myth and reality, poetry and prose, and conjures a world and a heroine that readers will never forget." What that description perhaps underscores the inability of those binaries of Euro-defined disciplines to categorize, embrace, or discipline the exciting work of Indigenous artists and scholars. Just as with Tagaq's award-winning music (she is best known for her throat-singing, including the 2014's Polaris Prize-winning album *Animism), Split Tooth* is another example of Tagaq's energetic connection to the wider universe. Tagaq, in an interview with Carla Gillis, has referred to the book as being about her life, with references made to source material coming from her journal.

This beautiful novel will appeal to readers of (the overlapping and interwoven categories of) contemporary fiction, Indigenous fiction, Inuit fiction, life narrative, and, of course, to fans of Tagaq's music who will be enthralled by another aspect of her powerful artistry.

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