

**FROZEN IMAGES/SINGLE SHOTS:
THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG.**

**AWOKE TO UNFAMILIAR
SMOOTHNESS. PAVED ROAD
AFTER HOURS OF GRAVEL. TREES
DWINDED TO CHARLIE BROWN'S
CHRISTMAS SIZE. LAKES, ROCKS,
LAST CORNER. AHEAD - TALL
SQUARE BUILDINGS, GLASS,
CEMENT, STOPLIGHTS - ISOLATED
URBANIA, FRONTIER TOWN
BUREAUCRACY, YELLOWKNIFE.**

**FADING CONNECTIONS
MURMURING, STUTTERING WHY
CLICK! AND THEY ARE GONE**

L e t t e r F r o m Y e l l o w k n i f e

A n d r a M c C a r t n e y

The journal gives rise to connected ideas and thoughts through description of isolated images which appear significant or disturbing. This seems fitting in a place where each person or thing on the tundra becomes framed by space and time. It starts in Yellowknife, the governmental and geographical centre of the Northwest Territories, and moves out to the edge of the sea, of the land, of the Circle, to Tuktoyaktuk.

Yellowknife is interwoven with many conflicting myths. This creates a welter of confusion. Isolated frontier, boom town, government centre, sophisticated city, heart of the territories.

Roadlines disconnected during freeze-up . . . anything or anyone from "outside" (south of 60° latitude) essentially mistrusted . . . including (especially?) Ottawa. Dress signifies "Northernness" -embroidered, fur-trimmed parkas, mukluks, fur mitts, plaid shirts. First question on meeting: "How long have you been in the North?" Credibility rests on the answer.

The impact of economic depression has not been felt as in the rest of Canada. Newspapers have pages of jobs. Qualifications necessary are less than outside, so opportunities for experience and advancement are greater. However, because of the "Hire North" policy, most of these carrots are unavailable to newcomers. But the promise exists that they will be - eventually, if you pay your dues and persevere. The American Dream moves North.

The North is prosperous in the way of the wild west, or Gold Rush. This mystique attracts opportunists, adventurers, gamblers. Young people can find experience and climb career ladders here in a way impossible in the economically crippled South. However positions of responsibility can be occupied by the inept or ethically bankrupt.

The "frontier boom town" atmosphere is most often felt on the streets or in some of the bars. Outside in the winter, it is hard to forget Yellowknife is an isolated Northern town. Unplowed rutted streets make roads and sidewalks hazardous; the wind bites; hair is frozen. People huddle together for rushed conversation - move on. Most vehicles are trucks and taxis. It is a relief to enter a bar and thaw out. Typical is the "Gold Range" saloon (also locally known as the Strange Range). A country and western bar with utilitarian furniture crowding a large room, it is literally jammed with people at midnight. All kinds of people . . . in all stages of inebriation (the hard-drinking Northerner mystique exists also). A stranger walking in might expect the tables to overturn in a B-movie brawl - and he may be right.



... A root, a toot, a tootliotdoot
 SUSPICION'S IN THE AIR
 (COMMIES EVERYWHERE)
 HE CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT A
 LOADED MX BESIDE HIM ...
 HE'S IN THE WHITEHOUSE NOW,
 PLAYING ORWELL'S THEME
 AND IT'S TIME WE ALL WOKE UP
 FROM THE AMERICAN DREAM ...

But in some ways the atmosphere of isolation is a tenuous myth. (This does not prevent it from being used by commercial establishments to "explain" outrageous prices.) It is impossible for the North to be isolated as in the past, when the news is now shown several times a day. Cable TV is available in Yellowknife, and pay-TV channels. There is a "Top 40" radio station. Video-cassette rental establishments do a huge business. Residents of the territories are aware of all that happens in the world, though through the eyes of commercial media. The myth of isolation to assert uniqueness in the minds of Yellowknife residents to assert uniqueness in a world defined by North American media standards. It must be believed that this is a place where it is possible to be a rugged individualist.

At the same time, there is a great deal of conformity here. The radical groups expected in the shadow of the Cruise are for the most part quiet and low-profile. A peace benefit last fall sold out. Everyone sat on chairs and applauded in the right places. The (mostly original) music was reminiscent of late 60's folk -with some surprises. The high point was a rendition of "Boogie-woogie Bugle Boy" with lyrics changed to spoof Reagan -and well done. All in all, though, the atmosphere was tame, civilized, reasonable. It seems Yellowknife is too prosperous to have a vocal radical group. No one is hungry enough? Or perhaps the transient nature of the city (few stay more than a couple of years, many stay a few weeks) prevents any cohesion? Or perhaps isolation works in a one-way direction. Commercial media use the air-waves to transmit information and perspectives immediately, and yet local resistance groups do not have the financial resources or political clout to gain access to such widespread dissemination as is available through commercial television. Alternatives - such as personal visits, phone calls, letters - are slower, more expensive or impractical here. Airline flights from the closest contact point (Edmonton) cost about \$400.

The capital city of the Territories is also its cultural centre. As such it hosts "Folk on the Rocks", a festival of Northern music. Also, the Northern Arts and Cultural Centre is now being built; a project familiar to all Canadians through its bizarre TV advertising. Both of these organizations are fraught with the same problems many territorial establishments are: lack of expertise; isolationism. But, as is often the case, these disadvantages are balanced by enthusiasm and energy on the part of some members. Yellowknife seems caught between 'frontier town' and heart of the territory; opposites by definition, tearing the fabric of myths apart.



**FIRST DAY IN TUK. FOOD, LUXURY,
SQUASH, STEAMBATH,
WHIRLPOOL, EXHAUSTION.
IRRIDATED MILK AND BLAND
WATER. ENERGETIC PEOPLE -
ATMOSPHERE OF TENSION,
UNCERTAINTY. FLIGHT IN A SMALL
PLANE. SINGLE ROOM.**

**IMPRESSIONS . . . LIGHTS ALWAYS
ON OUTSIDE. HELICOPTERS LAND
NEAR WINDOW. GIRL WALKING IN
FRONT OF BUS. WE SWERVED
AWAY, SHE FOLLOWED. WE HAD
TO SWERVE AGAIN. WHY DID SHE?**

Yellowknife is by far the largest population centre in the Northwest Territories, at around ten thousand people. Most other places have less than a thousand people. Tuktoyaktuk is a small settlement on the Beaufort Sea, within the Arctic Circle. Perhaps not typical of the rest of the Northwest Territories, but very different from Yellowknife. I arrive by Twin Otter from Inuvik. The size of the plane emphasizes the tininess of this community in the vastness of northern tundra. There are no trees, no mountains, few buildings, much snow. We drive past the town - small wooden houses, skidoos, trucks. The air terminal, post office are trailers. The Bay is the only store. The church is heated by a wood stove. Then out to the oil camps. They look like space stations. Huge, interconnected metal modules, standing on stilts on the frozen ground, isolated from the land, self-sufficient entities. Inside is luxury. Carpets, plants, armchairs, saunas, jacuzzi, stereo room, maid service, stocked snack bars. The galley serves meals with choice of four entrees.

There is little contact with the hamlet. The council has asked for the oil companies to prevent their employees from coming into town. This is to minimize the effect of the powerful technological culture on one which has traditionally been tied close to the land. But these restrictions cannot prevent the inroads of white culture. Looking out across the ice, the inhabitants of Tuk hamlet see the sprawling oil camps. And these are just the most recent manifestations. Missionaries came to the North long ago. Ask an Inuit now what their traditional music is like - he will probably look at you in confusion. Most do not remember. The missionaries denounced Inuit music as ungodly. So to be safe the Inuit stopped playing all forms of traditional music. On Inuit programming broadcast on CBC North, there is a great deal of Scottish jigging music. This is the contribution of the whalers. There were many possibilities for cultural exchange when the whaling ships were stuck in the ice for years.

**AT OUR FIRST DANCE HERE, AT
THE BEGINNING EVERYONE SAT
AROUND RESTLESSLY. THEN
"SATISFACTION" BY THE STONES
CAME ON. EVERYONE GOT UP AND
DANCED, STOMPED THEIR FEET.
SANG ALONG. IT WAS EERIE.**

**WE'RE THE WRONG COLOUR. IF A
IF A WHITE GUY DOESN'T COME
INTO WORK, HE'S PUT ON THE
NEXT PLANE OUT. BUT A NATIVE
CAN DO IT EIGHT, TEN TIMES
WITH JUST WARNINGS. THEY GET
SUBSIDIZED HOUSING,
SUBSIDIZED HEATING, TIME OFF
TO GO HUNTING ...**

**VAST SNOWNESS TREELESS
HUGE ORANGE SUN DISAPPEARS
MONTH OF DARK SILENCE.**

The Hudson's Bay traders supplied guns to replace harpoons and the peoples' whole way of life changed from nomadic hunting to trapping for southern markets.

More recently, television, radio and telephone have further changed life in the settlements. Telephone allows communication (even with Northwestel's sporadic service) across distances and in a short time. CBC radio is used for messages to family members and has Inuktitut programming. Locally popular music is also played - Scottish jigs, country and western ballads, and "Top 40" music. Motown music is extremely popular, with Michael Jackson achieving almost heroic status. The link between these forms of music is that they are all very kinesthetically oriented. The people love to sing along and dance. There is recorded music at every social occasion - (dry) dances, volleyball and floor hockey games, card games, different get-togethers of any kind. But the sound is never a background. When the music starts a volleyball game is transformed. Before the serve, people on the court sway. Even the ball seems to move in time; people's movements become more measured and graceful. Spirits are lifted.

The medium which seems to have had the greatest effect on the changing life up here is television. CBC has been available for about fifteen years in some places and is now widespread. Recent further southern development has brought satellite stations - HBO, the Movie Channel, USA Network, the Sports Channel, etc. - to the North during the last few years. Though the Native Communications Society are trying to provide more native programming with a recently received grant, most of what is shown depicts an utterly different "reality". Having little or no direct experience of southern life, it is easy to believe the dream sold on television exists down there.

The people want what is offered, and have come to rely on the oil companies and support services for employment to provide the money to buy. And in this region, the oil companies may not be around much longer. Once more the Inuk's choices will be narrowed. A recent view (of a book about Dome Petroleum) spoke of the oil companies' story as a modern myth (similar to previous myths about whalers or Northern explorers), depicted with "the macho charm of a twentieth century war without bullets, the romance of technology forced to its limits in a harsh climate, logistics turned lyrical. But war without weapons is not necessarily war without victims."

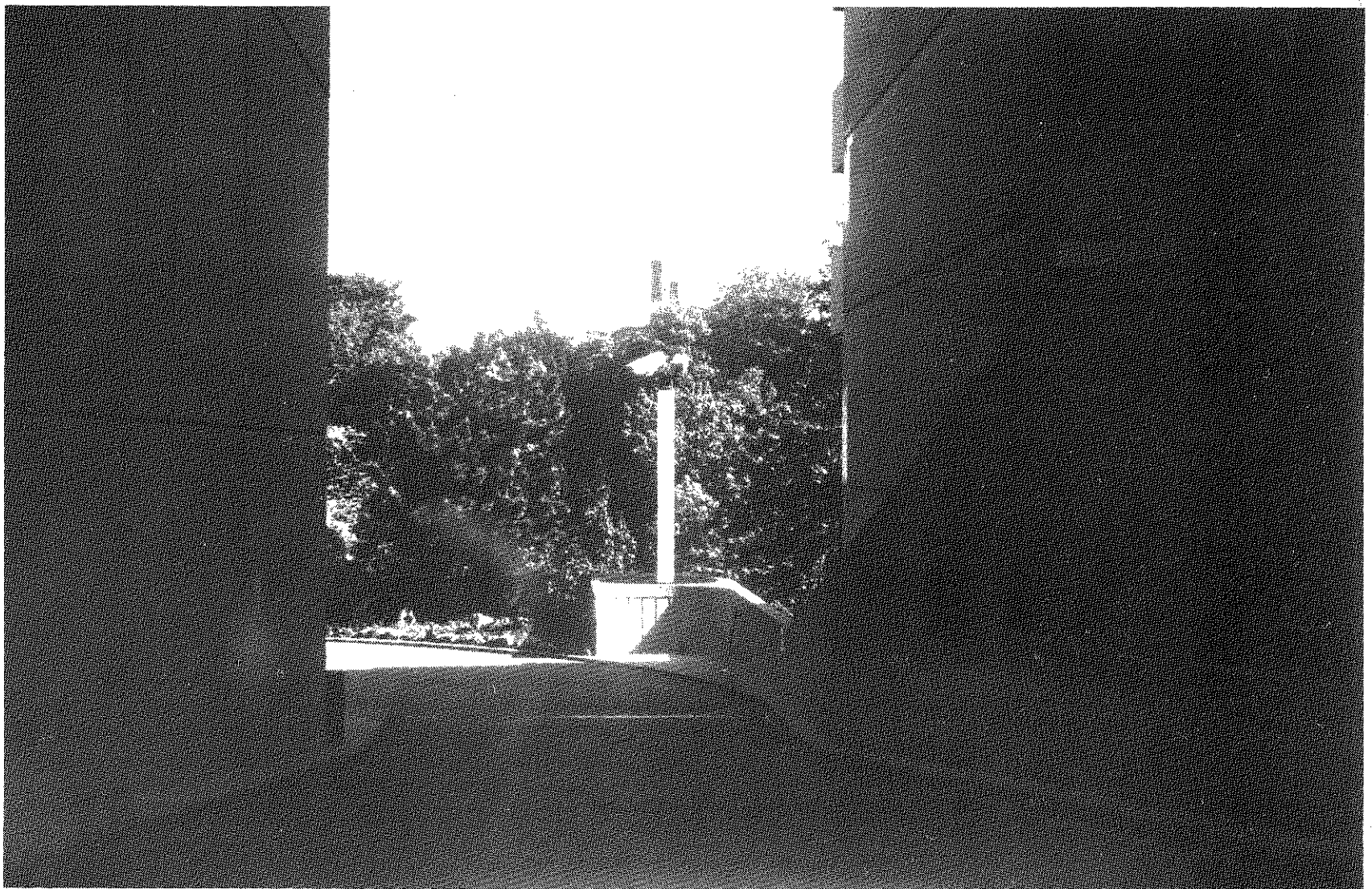
These victims are not only huddled over the video games or in front of the T.V. set, they are physically dying, too. Tuktoyaktuk (800 people) has had two murders, one castration and seven suicides in the past nine months. Other Delta communities, though less affected, have similar problems. Some people talk of the suicides as a type of subculture - but one which negates life completely? Feeling there are no choices left? It's hard to explain.

For I too am an outsider in this place. But I feel the effect of all these mythologies, living here. I am isolated - mail takes weeks, phone calls expensive. I have made sense of isolated images and sounds through conversations with Northern residents and travellers, oilmen, natives, government employees, transient workers. There is much happening here, and little enough written. I've done no more than scrape the surface. The iceberg is still there, and like the frozen miles of tundra, barely touched.



A quick survey
strengthened his earlier
convictions.

All official institutions of language
are repeating machines:
schools, sports, advertising,
popular songs, news.



It was his identity that counted,
an ability to choose his own direction,
his freedom to use what stood before him.

All continually repeat the same structure,
the same meaning, often the same words;
the stereotype is a political fact,
the major figure of ideology.