

Eric Heyne

## Introduction: Where Are We Going, Where Have We Been?

It's been seventeen years since I began my association with *The Northern Review* as a guest editor—along with former Yukon College professor Anne Tayler—for the first special literary issue (Number 10, Summer 1993). Seventeen brief autumns, with the cranes creaking across the sky and the light leeching out of the landscape daily. Seventeen long winters, some memorably cold or snowy or long, but lately marked by warm spells and the bizarre sound of winter rain. Seventeen springs, and you'd think by now I wouldn't be surprised at how long it takes for them to get up here. Seventeen summers (like this one now winding down) more or less smoky, rainy, buggy, or just too short. With the publication of this second literary issue some kind of cycle has come round again, and I'm grateful to be here to witness it, grateful for the opportunity to read the fascinating things people are saying these days about life in the North.

Our criterion for "nordicity" in Number 10 was residency: you were eligible to be included if you lived in Alaska or northern Canada. We beat the bushes for contributors, depending on word of mouth to draw in enough good work from among the small community of writers "up here." Our criterion this time was subject matter rather than residency. We put out a call for submissions of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction about the North, or set in the North, and we depended upon the wonders of electronic communication to get the word out more broadly.

As it turns out, however, most of our contributors this time also live in Alaska and northern Canada, and a good chunk of them live in the vicinity of either Fairbanks or Whitehorse. Perhaps I put too much faith in the Internet, or too little effort into getting that word out. Or perhaps most of the folks writing well about the North are the same ones who live here or have lived here, and the two distinct criteria of residency and subject matter are not in practice so far apart.

The poems and stories and essays in this volume do not represent a cross-section of life in the North, or even of life in the interior of Alaska and the Yukon, but something more like a series of snapshots, quick glimpses into the complex realities of Arctic and Subarctic life. The decision to include no more than two short works by any one author makes these glimpses feel even more ephemeral, but our hope is that collectively they provide something substantial. We have some geographic range, and a great deal of variety in style and genre. We have work from several people who are early in their careers, and we also have work from some very well-known authors, including a few people who were in our first literary volume and already widely read then. If this issue is a little bit like a family photo album, it includes several eccentric and farther-flung family members.

In characterizing these essays, poems, and stories as snapshots, I don't mean to imply that the reader is in for any sort of typical tourist travelogue. This is not a celebration of the wilderness beauty and charismatic megafauna of the North. There's nary a wolf to be seen. In fact, a lot of what happens in these literary works could happen in places farther south as well. Humans are human, wherever they live. The geographical difference that can be teased out of this writing is often subtle, a matter of a few degrees of light or latitude, a little more space, a few words in a different language or used in a slightly different way. Each of these selections has something specific and insightful to say about life in the North, in the opinion of at least one of us who were privileged to read the submissions. But often that insight emerges slowly or gently or even mysteriously, as a teasing hint into the differences encompassed by latitude.

The North is getting a lot more attention these days, as the shrinking polar ice cap sets off an international undersea land rush. But that paradox—undersea land—exemplifies a whole range of contradictions that contemporary writers-on-the-north have available to their art. How about politically liberal conservationists who advocate hunting and trapping, sometimes even the hunting of (gasp!) whales? Or the uneasy truce between rugged frontier individualism and enormous government subsidies, expressed most concisely in Alaska by the attitude of "Hands off my Permanent Fund Dividend!" And how does any individual, much less an entire community, handle the challenges of living a traditional indigenous life while taking advantage of the economic, educational, and scientific benefits of mainstream Western culture? As impossibly complex as these issues seem, they are far from hypothetical. This is life in the

North today, and any literature worth its salt will find fascinating ways to explore such issues.

There is certainly a complex support network available these days for writers who want to make a go of it in the North. The Creative Writing Program in Fairbanks is staffed by its fourth generation of teachers (dating back to the legendary “flying poets” of the 1960s), and the graduate program in Anchorage has just undergone a radical shift to low residency, after nurturing several very successful writers in the 1990s. Through blogs, websites, funding organizations like the Alaska State Council on the Arts and the Alaska Humanities Forum, visiting writers series, and all manner of conferences, festivals, slams, readings, and writers’ groups, the business and pleasure of making literature is taking place at a wild clip. In some seasons the ceremony of literature must compete with solstice parties and national holidays; in other seasons there are the conflicting demands of music, dance, and theater performances; film series, contra dances, and political rallies; whaling, potlatches and potlucks, fishcamp and moose season; commencement and field trips; crane and swan festivals; and the relatives showing up from Outside. It’s a wonder folks get any writing done at all. But they do, and it’s a joy to publish some of it here, to offer you an opportunity to take a break from your own frantic schedule to experience an alternate universe, maybe a Boreal Bizarro World, both entirely new and hauntingly familiar.

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