Billy-Ray Belcourt. *A History of My Brief Body*. Two Dollar Radio, 2020. 140 pp. ISBN: 9781937512934.

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Billy-Ray Belcourt, from the Driftpile Cree Nation, dedicates his first book of nonfiction to "those for whom utopia is a rallying call," noting that the book itself is an ode "to the world-to-come" (3). In the fourteen short essays that make up *A History of My Brief Body*, Belcourt blends personal history, theory, and discussions of craft in a creative nonfiction form that serves as resistance to "the glass walls of Canadian habit that entrap us all in compressed forms of subjectivity" (9). Creativity, poetry, writing itself are tools with which we might enter that world-to-come, and love is what will get us there. By describing and reaching toward the "queer NDN joy" (54) that he claims over and over in spite of the violence and sorrow of daily life, Belcourt takes readers to a place of openness, vulnerability, and intimacy.

The essays in this collection take different forms: letters, lists, and longer expositions. "An NDN Boyhood" shares family history; "Gay: 8 Scenes" traces Belcourt's life from a closeted teen to falling in love for the first time to experiences on and after dating apps; "Fragments from a Half-Existence" offers pieces of novels that Belcourt has tried to write; "Robert" takes readers through a year of moments and messages. Read individually or together, these essays can be taught in any creative writing classroom to encourage experimentation and explore the threads of argumentation.

In "An Alphabet of Longing," Belcourt writes: "My field of study is NDN freedom. My theoretical stance is a desire for NDN freedom. My thesis statement: Joy is an at once minimalist and momentous facet of NDN life that widens the spaces of living thinned by structures of unfreedom" (88). Joy—a "durational performance of emotion" (8), the art of breathing within oppressive and asphyxiating conditions—is that "ecology of feeling" (8) scattered throughout this short book: a hug between a father and son, "[b]uzzing with glee" (89) on a second date, finding "a book that was more than a book" (113), one that speaks to beingness and its inherent beauty. Yet as Belcourt notes, creative writing "traffics in ugly" (41)—and those moments that threaten the possibility of utopia are here too: communicating needs to an unsympathetic doctor after a nonconsensual experience, being followed by a straight white couple after

being spotted holding hands with a boyfriend, the heartbreak of falling in and out of love.

These moments are layered with reflections on what it means to be both queer and NDN, to live in a settler state that "has yet to recoil at its reflection in the rear-view mirror" (38). In the title essay, Belcourt writes that "the past starts into my brief body like a knife" (26). Histories of oppression thrive in the present in the form of police and mass shooters who live as if they were guns, white men who either fetishize NDNs or claim color-blindness, the disposability and unlivability of life. To all those who live in a world they did not want, Belcourt says, "Please keep loving" (111).

Love is both a path forward to utopia and an act to challenge the daily lived oppression of colonialism. "Join me in the ruins of the museum of political depression!" (9) Belcourt invites; amidst these ruins of "the world-at-large" (7), we reach the world-to-come through practices of love, joy, "radical empathy" (105), and poetry. Belcourt's writing is a practice of humanity, a counter to "the world of [the] courtroom" (123), a seeking of beauty in spite of all that is not beautiful. Belcourt writes, "we need to write against the unwritability of utopia" (9). By experiencing and telling these stories of living and loving, he opens possibilities for a future where "Canadian cruelty" (5) is no match for this "metaphysics of joy" (88).

Belcourt's writing is at times conversational, telling stories of meeting men on Grindr or questioning the blurry area between wanting to put words on a page and wanting to fall in love. At other times, Belcourt adds to critical conversations about capitalism, coloniality, and the politics of care. "'I'm an emotional person, so I read theory day in and day out'" (82), he tells an audience of conference attendees. Quoting from Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and others, Belcourt moves fluidly between theory, poetry, and story. Sentences are clear, making it possible to move through this small book quickly, but paragraph breaks, blank spaces on the page, and enumerations urge the reader to pause, to sit with quotes by Maggie Nelson and Ocean Vuong, or to linger with Belcourt's imagery: "a shoreline the water of memory drags its palm across" (21), "a question mark with fur" (41), "a glistening tragedy" (73), "a maw full of smoke" (114).

In the preface to *A History of My Brief Body*, "A Letter to Nôhkom," Belcourt honors his grandmother and her unconditional love for him. Though these were the first pages

of the book I read, they are the ones that stayed with me the longest, this letter to a caretaker who was the core of the family, someone who derived joy from those daily moments of giving love. Belcourt writes, "back then your love incubated a refuge, one I can always return to if need be" (5), and it is his kokum's "philosophy of love, which is also a theory of freedom" (6) that Belcourt inherits and through which he learns and practices joy, through which he can "love at the speed of utopia" (5). This book urges us to love, to always insist upon love.

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