

Arnott, Joanne. *Halfling Spring: An internet romance*. Illus. Leo Yerxa. Neyaashiinigiing, ON: Kecedonce, 2013. 127pp.

<http://www.kegedonce.com/bookstore/item/55-halfling-spring-an-internet-romance.html>

The story starts with two usernames in what the first poem of this collection calls an internet geography: in (cyber)reality, this is *riverspine*, an e-group for poets to exchange and comment on each others' work. Here *teaandoranges*, another user, intrigues *specificallyjo*, who scents something intriguing, draws her head back to sense the "taste in the air" (1). Maybe the Leonard Cohen reference draws her, given the similarity in delicate imagery. The two meet via *dadababy*, a third user or possibly a forum: as is often the case in this collection, the phrasing is indirect and imagistic. The introduction leads to showing each other their "dusty / back rooms"—a poetic phrase for what I think must mean allowing each other into the private areas of the forum where their creative works are stored—and talking in the public "foyer." By the end of the first poem of this linked collection, *teaandoranges* has a name, Alastair, and a more confident sub-title announces that the two are "e-dating."

And so begins, as the subtitle would have it, an internet romance. As the Acknowledgements section at the end makes clear, the poems in this collection document a real relationship between *specificallyjo*, a name which a quick Google search shows to be Joanne Arnott's real handle on such sites as Wikipedia, Youtube, Soundcloud and (presumably) many more forums, and Alastair Campbell. Not, thank goodness, the foul-mouthed Scottish politico, but rather a distinguished historian and anthropologist who has carried out extensive work for First Nations organisations including the Assembly of First Nations and the government of Nunavut. In other words, this is a relationship conducted via the written word—and, later, phone conversations—between two mature adults, in the no-space of the internet. It's unusual territory for First Nations writing, which as has so often been remarked is distinguished by an emphasis on physical geography and close relationships (or alienation from ancestral geographies and kin-ties, which amounts to the same thing).

Yet what stands out immediately in this collection (aside from the wonderfully spare illustrations) is precisely that it neither drifts off into cyber-abstraction nor absents itself from the real world. The relationship begins with early days in which the poet ("not an elder yet" (55)) opens herself up to the possibility of becoming once again giggly, silly, flirtatious, willing to trade experiences and believe in the possibility of romance. In the poem "savour," for example, she remarks that "i think i used the word 'love' twice / how indiscreet" (7). From there, the emotional forward drift of the relationship pulls us along to the full blossoming of a desire that "calls me in a low crowmoan, distracting" (63), including brief side-stops into jealousy or uncertainty, eventually leading the speaker and listener to their first physical meeting. Through all this are threaded the more mundane and the more sacred concerns of the world, which does not stop for this relationship (nor, it seems, would either participant wish it to do so). The early poems are filled with natural imagery, with Canadian animals (jaybird, watermoccasin) and a Métis/First Nations consciousness of landscape. Dropping like a stone into the lighthearted early section comes the poem "climate change," which meditates upon an earth destroyed "by the greed of wealthy nations" (17), an earth who "may shift about any time she chooses" (18). Given the lover's location in Inuit territory, it is obvious how this destruction of polar ice and northern habitats feeds into the main theme of the collection. Yet it also points up the ways in which the

poet refuses to see her and her lover as being in any way walled off from the larger political concerns for social and environmental justice that have always centered Arnott's work. The earth is wounded, and the work of healing does not stop at the border of the computer screen. Equally, Arnott shows how the virtual conversation infects and inflects the real world. As she comes to accept that "there is someone in this world" (27) and as desire builds through poems such as "delving" (41), with its multiple explorations of pocket imagery, so the sight of "on the sidewalk across the street / crow is fucking crow" (51) takes her back to her own insecurities within the relationship.

As the poet travels around Canada, she adopts local nations' traditions, referencing sacred totemic animals such as crow, hummingbird and water glider. Given Alastair's location on Baffin Island, it is not a surprise that Inuit traditions, particularly the sacred cairns known as *inuksuit*, are particularly on her mind. She wrestles with the ways she can image an "urban *inuksuit*," a single figure I think for Indigenous continuance and change in a ravaged and colonised landscape. Of the many and varied cultural references (e.g. Chanticleer), one in particular stands out, namely the employment of Audre Lorde's title "Uses of the Erotic (The Erotic as Power)." The entire collection can be seen as a poet's claiming of her erotic self and refusal to allow any of her lived experiences—as mother, as Métis person, as older woman, as pseudonymous internet presence, as traveller, as survivor—to preclude or occlude any other. The tenderness and willingness to open oneself to another is a feature of the lover and of the ethical inhabitant of the land: the two are not separable and should not be seen as such.

Possibly Arnott's most successfully intertwined work yet, this collection delicately yet firmly brings First Nations poetry into a digital age, insisting on a continuing transmotion into a new (un)colonised space that nonetheless can be inscribed with traditional imagery. Leo Yerxa, who according to Arnott's Afterword was given the entire corpus and allowed to choose which poems to illustrate, has done a fantastic job of capturing the feel of Arnott's deft blend of the simple and direct with the allusive and symbolic, using the simplest possible pencil lines to create images of natural landscape and human body.

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