

Pin Cherry Morning

Gloria Mehlmann was born and raised on the Cowessess First Nations reserve. She is intensely aware that the extraordinary life of ordinary people living on reserves remains almost impossible to see and hear against a backdrop of political messaging. She is working on a book of short stories wherein she addresses this omission of voice through her unique perspective as a child of the Cree and the Saulteaux.

We three gathered in the doorway of the porch and stood in a pool of morning light. A perfect light - summery and clear. A light that sharpened the red glow of pin cherries beyond the fence wherein each berry marked its depth with a fine black line that ended in a tiny dot, like a pin. The bright light of mid-morning deepened the shadows in the bushes from which hung feathery branches of green and silvery-grey that turned and shifted as if by some unknown force. The thought of pin cherry flavour etching the roof of the mouth in a splinter-burst of tartness, made my jaws ache, made my mouth water.

With the ripe ones, the mouth watering comes twice, I knew. First, the thought of the first bite and its abrupt grab at your jaws in a bright, phantom taste. Second, the actual clamp down of teeth that releases a spring of juices that twist your mouth into new shapes, and even makes your eyes water, if a berry is sour.

Eating pin cherries meant sitting on the tree-pole fence and getting your nerve up. It meant reaching and then grabbing onto a branch where you pulled and raked off a handful and then removed leaves and bits of non-berry to swiftly fill your mouth with one, then two, and more.

The clear air sculpted the cheeks of Tony and Leta, my seven year old brother and little sister who was four. We stood together wondering what to do first: hunt for swimming holes in the bushes where the land dips and fills with rain water, catch tadpoles quivering in small see-through pools near croaking green frogs and toads that look like tired stones, blow feathered dandelion heads off their stalks away into the wind, or find tiger lily "pencils" to sketch with.

"Let's pick berries to see who can eat them without making a face," I say.

Leta doesn't want to, and she says no to a game of tag between the sweet-smelling rows of corn and snow peas on struts, and no to watching the horses in the shaded side of the barn swishing their tails at blue bottle flies. I didn't like to go near the flies. Their bites stung if you weren't watching. I couldn't look at them, sometimes, even with my eyes at the ready - when the rest of me just wasn't. Blue bottles dug through the skin of a horse, Tony said. He knew their babies were inside, in the raised bumps where eggs had been laid. Leta and I once went along to see.

Gladys, our horse, stood lazy in the heat of the sun and twitched her back into rolling rills where invisible gnats danced. Tony put a halter on her and tied her to the corral. She ate carrots pulled from the garden out of our freshly scented hands. Tony told us he'd squeeze the lump and we should watch the top of it. We sat ourselves near Gladys' rump and waited. Tony found a ripe one, he said. We looked. It was near the middle of the horse's back. I knew I wanted to see, and that I couldn't make myself cover my eyes. I knew I couldn't look away once I began. This feeling of my body wanting to run away and my mind wanting to know was strong. I stayed. Proof was coming that such horrible things are real. I marveled that Tony could do this. That he was willing to touch. His tanned hands reached and he placed his thumbs on the flat sides of the lump, and said watch.

"Hold on to Gladys' tail," he called, which I did so that she couldn't switch our faces with her long, black, stinging hairs.

Thumbs came together. Slowly and firmly at first - and then, pop! Out came a dollop of white pus and then up came a short, ridged, creamy maggot, fat as a finger. Part of my mind screamed. It's true! Things are true, even if they are hidden and you can't see. Even under you on a horse you might ride. My skin shriveled as goose bumps of horror rose.

Tony said, "See! I told you!" and then he said, "Roddy ate one for money, you know!"

My mind was saying no oh on oh no when Tony added, "Want me to prove it?" But I was already running, hiding what was possible from my mind.

The three of us sat in the heart of this new day. Leta didn't want to see the horses, and I didn't want the bluebottles. The porch steps grew hot under our feet.

"I know!" Tony said, "Let's see if the robin's eggs are hatched!" His eyes were bright.

Since it is the best idea, we carefully climb down, descending in bare feet down the slivered stairs, cautiously now across patches of prickly grass, past the thistles and a circle of broken glass so that there'll be no days of soaking feet in hot salt water to keep a vein of blood from blackening and running up the inside of one's leg - while siblings move free as wind and water.

The nest has held four beautiful eggs of a miraculous blue all this week. It is a hue of blue mixed from the lightest blue of the evening sky and the greeny white of the burbling stream that catches the morning light. Mom says it is a blue very different from natural things, just the same. It is a blue decided upon by a painter who makes men and children hunt everywhere else and never find it. Now Mom rests quietly inside, out of the heat.

Sometimes, I'd come face to face with what I hadn't hunted for, a thing so strange I hid myself away. One was the cat, a striped orange stray that wasn't our pet. It hung around the barn a lot. There was cruelty when that cat played with its prey, I saw. It gave the mouse hope and then took it away, again and again; it was, "You are free to go," and then, "Oh, no, you don't!" The end was the same, a helpless dob of mouse, sluggish with fear, finally killed. A tiny mouse had made a monster of the cat, and so I hid that day.

I didn't hide about the cow. The cow lost her red and white, wavy-furred calf and she bawled and crashed through the bushes for days, hunting. She ran across our yard and into the fields, her milk sack swinging. We found out much later that rustlers had come to the reserve. Mom said the cow bawled because her udder was full to bursting and needed to be sucked where she hurt. I thought it might be the love of a mother for its missing baby. I wanted it to be that. Otherwise, I couldn't explain to myself the sadness in the cow's call, unless it was a mother's tears. Animals suffered in silence, I knew, like when they gave birth. A bitch in a secret corner of a haystack nearest the barn wall looked for mercy whenever you stared down at her soft mounds of new-borns. Sometimes, in a short burst, an animal called out very suddenly, like when a rabbit was caught in a snare at night, or when a pup got itself stuck someplace. The rest was voiceless.

Our excited anticipation of peering into a sweet robin's nest pulled us forward on tender and watchful feet. Four year old Leta carried herself with the fierce confidence of a bear cub, a little ball of fur used to the watchful gaze of its mother that gives the gentlest smacks in moments of mild direction. The touchstone of getting what you want.

I was Coyote, however, scolded for seeking the boundaries where wildness feeds itself. There might be rules whispered in bear cubs' ears, earnest, sure, and secret. I didn't know these rules and wouldn't keep them. A cub, though, knew to pull itself out of a jam by executing a sweet jump with a half turn. I had neither grins nor sweetness to display, being different. Coyotes keep to the edges of peripheral fields that are neatly trimmed, avoided altogether if there is a Mama bear with a rolling cub crossing.

The world of the bear and the coyote are different, "miles apart" my elders have said. Something tossed over a fence, from the bear's domain, piques the nostrils with smells that are lively and keen in all their

variability in the snout - odour-sharpness not the only point of location in the depths of coyote mind. Northern lights sharpen the coyote's wit, the stream cleans its teeth, and a flurry of a pheasant thrills the coyote's fur and lifts its life-sniffing paws. Coyote.

I was given the name Coyote. I could live that way, apart. I stayed out of the baby bear's way. A Coyote is older than a bear cub by a whole year, I knew and it watched and listened for help and trust and a mothers' love in all the growing things.

One peek and it was true. The robins were out! The blue ovals were shattered now, lying in cracked ruins on the floor of the nest. Four reddish-brown sacs of breathing heat-gobs rested there, their dark eyes covered and bulging under a coat of skin. The mother robin was out hunting for food to give to such ugly, fascinating bits of life. Leta pitched herself forward, a cub wanting to see.

"Don't touch!" I called out, behind her. "Mom says if you touch, the mother bird will know and she'll leave her babies to die."

Leta sulked.

Tony considered. "We could take a spoon or something and lay them in a saucer. We could really see against the white."

"That would still be touching!" I said, "I'll tell Mom if you do!"

"We could look at just one and put it right back," Tony said, "I can do it carefully."

"You might drop it!" I shuddered at the thought of such tiny nakedness getting caught in a branch, or worse, tumbling to the ground and into what kind of heap!

Tony said I was a scaredy cat and a tattle tale. Yes, I think, and a coyote that leaves baby birds alone. A coyote that is too curious, still...

Leta slipped into the house and came back with a white saucer. She handed it to Tony. I ran and hid in the porch. But the part of me that wanted to

see the operation hung on to the rest of me. I went out, and I didn't call Mom.

The shock I felt was the same as the time Dogin and his twin bother, Big-shy-man, called to us to come outside and see a trick that Dogin made up with frogs. Our mothers and we were visiting at Kokum's house, our evening meal done.

"Yes, come!" Dogin called, "You never seen this before!"

That erased my reluctance - seeing something new, the impossible. However, there was usually trouble whenever we joined Winnie's boys. Something either got broken, someone got upset, or there'd be a fight. Tony, Leta, and I never came out on top. Skunkie their big sister, older than all of us, stuck up for the little eight year old twin brothers, no questions asked. She did this by direct physical force, like twisting our arm till we cried and then laughing with cruel scorn at our tears. She'd beat us all and leave us crying together in shame.

I was glad that Skunkie would soon return to the residential school in Marieval because I wanted to reverse the shame I felt, once and for all. I told Tony and Leta my plan. We'd wait in the bushes between our house and their aunt's, where Dogin and Big-shy-man visited most days. We'd ambush them now that Skunkie was gone. It thrilled me and gave me a feeling of cold, too, this certainty of a battle won. When the day arrived, Dogin and Big-shy-man, I knew, would come up the footpath that led from their place, across the stream, past Kokum's, then past our place, and finally through the bushes near our house to their Aunt Flora's, a big, white house standing where the bushes cut away.

I was tense as I crouched in a stand of furry-leaved willows, spear grass, and foxglove where sweet revenge and triumph were contemplated. I told Tony that he and Leta could take on Big-shy-man, the smaller of the two, who cried easily and was considered

by us a coward. His mean little mouth pouted innocently whenever his mother wanted answers and he needed only to point at his chosen culprit for the slaps to ring. Though this distressed me and I would take great delight in beating it down, I wanted Dogin. I wanted him to myself, and I insisted on it.

He was as tall as me and every bit as skinny. I knew my knuckles would blast with pain when they connected with his sharp bones. I didn't care. Just last week, he slapped me across the face while Skunkie stood there daring me to hit back. I wasn't about to give into the prodding of a solid 13 year old. She had finished off my seven year old brother, Tony, when he sassed her, didn't she? Worse, she'd pushed little Leta, that day, and forced her to walk backward till she fell in a bear cub heap beside Tony who nose bled and who blubbered like he shouldn't.

Now, "Take that!" Dogin had said to me, smiling brightly.

My face stung and my cheek lit with a painful burn. As if that wasn't enough, Skunkie laughed in my face. She called me a dumb Ojibway, too, and put her arms protectively around her brothers. I wanted to call her a dumb Cree but that was half my family and she had already insulted the whole of my Mom's side. Had I called her a dumb half-breed my Mom would have whipped me. Add to this, Skunkie had the colouring of her father, light brown hair and blue-green eyes that I admired, and wanted.

Walking away, she turned to call to Tony, "Damn good for you!"

Coyotes don't take this lying down, I told myself. But then there I was, down.

At last Dogin and Big-shy-man approached, singing a foolish made up tune. When I stepped out of the bushes I asked Tony to separate the boys. The twins realized their situation in the full.

"It's you against me, Dogin, no one else. So you better fight for your life because you're gonna to get it, this time!"

He knitted his brows in a solid ridge of black, and stood considering his opponent. He put up his fists, and without calling ready I cracked him a punch, square on the nose. Dogin saw his nose spurt blood and screamed for his brother, who was stubbornly trying to tangle with Tony, to run for it.

I didn't want the fight to be over that soon. I had pictured a couple of swift kicks, a head-shaking hair-pull, and a loud, satisfying, open-handed-slap on that face. But they ran like lightning and we couldn't leave Leta who had managed to stay out of the battle and who would surely tell Mom, now.

So now here they were, after supper at Kokum's, calling us from the table to join them outside. The thing I had never seen before called just as hard.

I matched my steps to Tony's as he burst into a sprint behind the twins whose speed had picked up down the path. We slammed into to our favourite spots in a patch in the road and waited; this, our rallying point, was only a widened hollow in the path connecting our homes. We all played there, our activities over time widening the space that always felt like major territory. The dry mud, ground to a fine powder, felt good to our bare feet.

On this early evening hour, when the sun stretched our shadows to the trees, Dogin went over to a clump of tall grass and came back with a jar. The sealing jar had a live frog in it. Mom and Kokum and all our aunts forever warned us never to touch a frog or we'd get warts all over our hands. So I said I wasn't going to touch it, and Dogin said to just shut up and watch.

He removed the frog from its jar and laid it on its back in the dust. He stroked its white stomach and pressed his thumb on its chin so that it lay stretched out and still, its hind feet like hands reaching.

Its heart throbbed under pallid skin. Then Dogin did a horrible, hair-raising thing. He carefully grabbed the two hind legs, one in each hand and waited. "See, he's breathing," he said, and with a jerk, he pulled the legs apart so fast and hard that the frog's body split and its black guts spilled out unto the ground. I screamed. Tony cried out "Aghhhh!" over my screams. I hid my face in my arms hearing the sound of Tony puking and the pealing laughter of Dogin - and Big-shy-man's scornful squeal of a final triumph.

Mom cried when we told her. She said that bad things would happen to us all now, and that we had better be as good as can be so that Dad could come home from the war. For a coyote that might mean not looking at some things, I told myself.

There was another time I very much wanted to hide and not look; but I didn't on account of my little cousin, Marcy. Uncle Earl's big black dog, Frank, licked little Marcy's crotch, that day. How it started, no one knew. She was six. I was six. I had stepped into the room off the kitchen, where Uncle Earl sat with tea and bannock biscuits, and when I looked out the window I caught sight of this. It was strange behaviour for a dog and stranger still to see Marcy holding her panty down and presenting herself to the dog's long, red tongue. I looked at Uncle Earl who lowered his eyes; but he secretly watched the shocking scene, too, despite the need to cherish privacy. It was such an ordinary summer day, otherwise, with the sky very blue and the grass very green and Marcy very, very young. She was so unknowing, in fact, that she had not idea she could be seen; she thought being behind the house was all that was needed, never mind people on the inside, and never mind the window where she saw only reflected sky and trees where the sunlight played tricks.

Mom stepped into the room and stood stalk still. She turned beet-red and said to me, as if something was about to break, "Go and tell Marcy to come in, now!"

The rest was trying to put shame in its place, for Mom. Winnie, mom's best friend, walked into the house later that day to ask what the trouble was. Mom cried that she was so ashamed to have such a thing happen in front of a male relative.

"A girl that young - and so - dirty!" she said. And that was when I wanted to hide but didn't, for Marcy.

Winnie said, yes, she was young. Too young to feel shame. "Besides," she said, "Think - what does any of it mean with everyone so mixed up about things?"

Mixed up or not, the scene to me was the beginning of beguilement. Like a coyote, I eaves-dropped and opened my eyes for answers to strangeness everywhere. Because everyone was mixed up - I could tell that would be interesting.

Cousin Roddy was mixed up. Take the day, on the way to town, when he was badly upset. Kokum and my aunts and Mom had to pull him off the wagon and tell him to walk behind till he stopped being a wild man. He yelled and screamed and cried so much, Mom said, because a bad man did terrible things to him in Round Lake School.

The sun was bright and purple lilacs scented the air that day. We got ready to go to town, some 12 miles away. For the trip, Kokum had borrowed a team of horses from Martin Delacroix, a bachelor, who lived in his house across the small stream separating their houses. We needed salt, flour, sugar, and lard Kokum told him and green liniment for her legs that were swollen with arthritis and that made her varicose veins pain, too.

The women had to decide what to do with Roddy who was acting up. They couldn't just leave him at home; neither could Martin nor Winnie stay at the house to look after him. He was fourteen and big for his age. His behaviour today would get worse. Mom, Kokum and the aunts stood outside beside the wagon that had slowly filled with blankets to sit on, a box of

bannock and a big, dented milk can filled with water. Flies buzzed and sorted themselves out around us.

Twittering canaries and bluebirds flew in and around the garden and lit briefly on the bar-wire fence then flicked off toward the stream. The aunts and Mom stood thinking in their floral summer dresses, ironed earlier that morning; their open-weave second-hand sweaters hanging like sacks over their shoulders. Mom's dark curls were soft and full and she looked nice in her tweed jacket, a man's cut down. Roddy would soon become violent, they said. What would they do with him then, and on the road? The little girls were too young to be left at home. Leta and I could sit on laps, I offered. Aunt Mary's legs were stiff and unbendable with arthritis now and it was impossible for her to climb up and step down - and who could lift her? She, not Roddy, would have to stay home alone, Kokum decided.

Roddy had had fits before. When these began he made choking sounds deep inside him, so deep that he couldn't be found and pulled out, the women said. There were no men to help, either. They were at war across the sea, fighting for the King. They'd just have to risk taking Roddy along, Mom said. Right now he lay on the bed, curled up on his side, saying he couldn't and wouldn't go. His tears showed sadness, not anger yet. And this was a sure sign, the aunts told one another.

Roddy was my second cousin who came to stay with Kokum, on Cowesses, because Aunt Georgina, his mother, brought him back to the reserve from Regina where she was trying to make a living on her own. The residential school, in Lebret, returned Roddy to her the year she left for the city, when he turned 13. It was obvious, Aunt Georgina said, that when he got home he wasn't the person he was meant to be; he was a stranger, broken down. Those bright inquisitive eyes of his were gone.

For a while in their little apartment in Regina, near the General Hospital, he was fine. He swept the courts and did odd jobs for the janitor, for a quarter, every so often. He kept himself clean and tidy.

Aunt Georgina worked as a cleaning lady at the "the General." At noon hour, she'd slip home to see Roddy; her work thankfully close by. But soon, he showed no real interest in the places she took him. He acted nervous when out, and sad too, often wanting just to go home. At first Aunt Georgina didn't notice anything. Then one day, after work, she found her newspaper torn up into little bits and strewn in the middle of the living room floor. Roddy refused to answer her questions about it. Another time, he'd grabbed a butcher knife from the kitchen counter and plunged its point into the fabric of the chesterfield in several places. This time, he denied knowledge of it; he seemed as earnestly shocked and worried as she. He cried a lot nights and more frequently during the day, so Georgina brought him home to Kokum's, begging for help.

That was the reason Kokum had him and now asked him to walk into town behind the team and wagon. Half way to town, his eyes grew wild and he hit Tony quite suddenly in the back of the head. No one saw it coming and now Tony lay across Aunt Ena's lap sobbing. This made Roddy flail his arms and legs and scream, in an agony no one understood. Mom told Miriam to grab the reins. She then helped Ena and Kokum wrestle and hold Roddy down in the wagon. They tied a twine plaited rope around his waist. Ena grabbed the reins and the rest of the women pulled Roddy off the wagon. Now he stood there puzzled, trying to smile. His crooked smile was wiped away by sadness and then by anger that took turns in his face as he stood waiting.

Then everyone but he climbed back up and Kokum said giddy-up. The wagon began to move. The rope tightened and Roddy lurched forward. For the next

long while, Roddy cried and pleaded and howled and ran up as though afraid. He yelled and screamed and fell back but the wagon kept going. I stared at the strange, terrible sight. Cars passed us and the dust whirled. Roddy grew dustier and more tear-streaked; still, Kokum kept the team plodding, on and on. The aunts cried silently, like her, I saw.

"He needs to go to the hospital," Aunt Ena said.

"We can't leave him there. They'll take him away," Miriam said, and now she too cried.

I tried to keep my eyes open and not turn my face away. But my eyes stung and so I cried, too, because everyone else was, and there was sadness mixed in with other things. Even a coyote's eye couldn't pierce it all.

The sun was burning our backs as we hunched over the robin's nest. Tony had run in for a table spoon and now held it behind him. The new robin sacks throbbed inertly as the gnats and flies buzzed and sizzled next to the nest. Sunlight dappled the ruins and feathery leaves swayed and skip-danced overhead. Swallows and sparrows chirped and trilled in the trees. The air was light on our cheeks.

"Don't you dare!" I whispered sharply to Tony as he brought the spoon nearer the nest.

"Yes!" countered the cub.

"You'll see." Tony was calm. He was intent. I ran away and hid.

My fingers were my earplugs and my knees held them tight to my ears as I sat on the porch step, my eyes shut so tight they hurt. To my left, and down a ways, something was taking place and I couldn't move. Suddenly Tony was speaking to me; he stood above me and asked me to look.

"I got them unto the saucer. Come and look before I put them back!"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I can't. I don't want to!"

"They're all right. You're scared for nothing. Come and look at how clear you can see. Then I'll put them back. 'Promise.'"

He pulled me up by the hand and I opened my coyote eyes. He pulled me carefully toward the site where Leta sat, her back to us, holding the saucer of birds on her lap. Then Tony screamed, "No, Leta, quit it!"

He was so genuinely horrified that I had to look.

Leta sat there, calmly cutting across the neck of one of the baby birds with a kitchen knife. One already lay separated. There was a sudden and horrible silence without movement. - Except for the sharp rasp of that knife and that small, terrible centre of calm. The territories of the bear and the coyote had been crossed, utterly. Tony's mouth was twisted as he stood there, tears falling, unable to speak.

It wasn't because of the pin cherries.

Gloria Mehlmann